

ABSTRACT

I AM MY BELOVED'S: INCREASING INTIMACY WITH JESUS THROUGH THE SONG OF SOLOMON AND CLASSICAL SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

by

Eugene A. Maddox

The purpose of this project was to examine the effects of a ten-session group study of the Song of Solomon on a volunteer, self-selected group of twelve committed attendees from two United Methodist churches in Interlachen and Palatka, Florida. The findings of this study demonstrate that participants can appreciably grow in their relationships with Jesus Christ and in their self-awareness when introduced and led into a typological understanding of the Song of Solomon and through the use of three classical devotional practices: *Lectio Divina*, Breath Prayer, and Divine Office.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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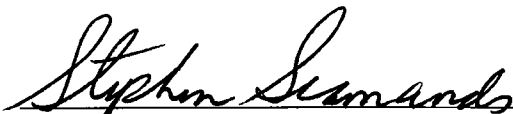
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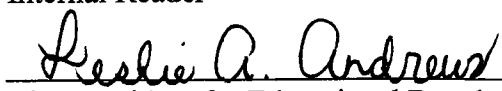
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**I AM MY BELOVED'S: INCREASING INTIMACY WITH JESUS THROUGH THE
SONG OF SOLOMON AND CLASSICAL SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**

A Dissertation

**Presented to the Faculty of
Asbury Theological Seminary**

**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry**

**by
Eugene A. Maddox**

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In January 1999, I was given the tremendous privilege of experiencing two Spirit-anointed, consecutive classes on spiritual formation at Asbury Theological Seminary (ATS). Those classes, in conjunction with the Song of Solomon, my daily face-to-face time with my Lord, and an enlightening experience aboard an airplane, provide both the building blocks and inspiration for this dissertation. God has used the Song of Solomon and some of the classical spiritual disciplines to take me closer to his heart than I have ever been. This dissertation is my attempt to construct a means whereby I (and hopefully other teachers in the future) may enable others to grow toward his transforming presence.

Until November of the year before I experienced those courses, my face-to-face time with the Lord had been virtually nonexistent for at least a year. I was getting further and further away from my Rock, and I could not find the road back.

Therefore, I am more than grateful to my SF 800 class for requiring me to keep a month-long journal and my SF 840 class for requiring me to keep a record of my spiritual disciplines, also for a month. As I approached these classes, I sensed deeply that God was calling me (Ps. 42:7a) to get serious about my time with the Lord and that these two weeks were a virtual once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Both classes also presented me with excellent reading that was informative, encouraging, and quite convicting.

On my plane trip to ATS, I was sitting in my seat, relaxing. Unexpectedly a verse of Scripture shot into my mind as clearly as if I had just memorized it. I had not read this verse in years; I was not even aware that I had ever memorized it. The verse was Psalm 16:11b: "In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures

forever.”

My first thought was that the Lord was telling me he was going to allow the plane to crash and that I was soon to be in heaven in his presence, yet the plane did not crash. I began, therefore, to wonder how this verse could, in my lifetime, ever become a reality or even a near-reality in me of all people. Nevertheless, making this Scripture a reality is precisely what God began to do for me.

When I arrived at ATS, I prayed (though somewhat half-heartedly) for God to direct me to a place in his Word where I should begin reading for my quiet time. I quickly felt led to read and study in three places: Psalm 16, Psalm 45, and especially the Song of Solomon. In my twenty-four years as a Christian, I had never had any desire at all to study the “mushy” Song of Solomon. Nevertheless, this epiphany was to be God’s time to open to me some of its unique richness, its place in the canon, and its unique contribution to a biblical understanding of having a relationship with Jesus as my divine Bridegroom-King. Here I have been and am being blessed beyond my highest expectations. The well has found me.

One day in our SF 800 class, we briefly touched upon the issue of shame. As I began to understand its meaning and how it is different from guilt, lights went on and bells began to ring inside my heart. I had partially known what this thing called shame was, but now I had a label for it and, therefore, a way to investigate and begin to comprehend it.

As the theory of shame began to intrigue me, I found myself suddenly applying it to the bride in the Song of Solomon. Much to my astonishment, I discovered that this esteemed young lady with a remarkable self-image had been horribly shamed by her

family and companions. The explanation for her unexpectedly outstanding self-image is the healing love of her bridegroom. This relationship would, in the end, prove more powerful and more influential than all of her other relationships combined. This unique relationship would lift her out of her shame, bringing her victory in the very same places where she had been so horribly shamed. This Song of Songs, then, was about, of all things, grace, hope, and healing.

Statement of the Problem

As I, over the last few years, have bathed in this experience, I have encountered one recurring frustration: I must help the people in my church to know Jesus, not only as Savior and Lord, but also as their divine lover, their Bridegroom-King and expose them to and restore to them these virtually unknown but incredibly helpful classical disciplines. I must make available these divinely ordained instruments to enable the people to experience a greater transformation into the image of the Lord Jesus. So much of what I have gained was new to me and, yet, is still unknown by them because this book and these classical disciplines have been virtually lost to today's twenty-first century Western church.

Richard W. Corney writes of the honored place the Song of Solomon at one time possessed within the history of the Church:

For much of Christian history the Song of Songs has been an immensely popular text, one that has generated an incredible number of commentaries and expositions. Clearly ... the Song of Songs was a book about which people wished to read. Earlier, in the Middle ages, Christians interpreted no other Old Testament book as often as they did the Song of Songs. (497)

Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, in the book Devotional Classics, write concerning the modern day loss of the tremendous value that comes from reading the

classical writers:

We today suffer from the unexamined notion that the more recent something is, the better, the truer it must be.

Genuine devotional classics ... are writings that aim at the transformation of the human personality. They seek to touch the heart, to address the will, to mold the mind. They call for radical character formation. They instill holy habits....

It is a genuine asset to be soaked in the devotional classics. Pure modernity makes us parochial. But these writings have vintage. They are weaned from the fads of the market place. (1-2)

As the participants weekly experienced the writing of the masters through this ten-week project, a primary goal was the transformation about which Foster and Smith write. As the group members experienced this transformation, I sought to help them see the relationship between their experience and the classical writings that they encountered.

C. S. Lewis shares the same passionate concern as he writes of the trend within contemporary theology to prefer new writers to the classical ones:

This mistaken preference for the modern books and this shyness of the old ones is no more rampant than in theology. Wherever you find a little study of Christian laity you can be almost certain that they are studying not St. Luke or St. Paul or St. Augustine ... but ... A new book is still on its trial and the amateur is not in a position to judge it. It has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications (often unsuspected by the author himself) have to be brought to light. (God in the Dock 201-02)

Also, Thomas Oden, in his book After Modernity ... What?, writes, “Christianity ... is to be properly judged and understood by its primitive formation and especially by those periods of its historical development that have given the most careful attention to the original vitalities of its primitive formation.” He tells the story of the day he realized the immense personal value the Christian masters were for his spiritual journey. On that particular day, he was to leave for a distant place and could only choose a relatively small number of books to bring with him. As he was laboriously choosing his books, he

surprisingly discovered that none of the books he was choosing were from the twentieth century (24).

As Oden reflects upon his own spiritual journey, he goes on to say, “I found the premodern writers more personally significant for my growth, more crucial for my personal being, than the full range of scientific and literary achievements of the twentieth century” (24-25).

M. Robert Mulholland writes in his book Invitation to a Journey of the Christians’ need of the classical disciplines, which the masters give, explain, and model:

We tend to think of the classical spiritual disciplines of the body of Christ as secondary or even optional to the real spirituality of our own private spiritual disciplines. But the classical disciplines serve to bring our lives into, and hold our lives in, God’s environment for wholeness in Christ. The classical disciplines give us the support structure within which our own spiritual disciplines become means of grace for the transformation of our being into the wholeness of Christ. (105)

While a working knowledge of the classical disciplines is foreign to many, Christians can be encouraged because through numerous writers and guides the Holy Spirit seems to be drawing the Church back to these divine sources of grace. That the Church is so returning is clearly something of which God is in favor today for from the first chapters of Genesis, God has been at work, through Christ, to transform humanity from its broken image more and more into the image of Christ. In fact, one might well say that the theme of the entire Bible is God’s gift of transformation as given through Jesus Christ.

Biblical/Theological Foundations

In approaching the Song of Solomon, the inevitable question of interpretation comes immediately to the forefront. The Song of Solomon is much more than a story

about a bridegroom and a bride. A. B. Simpson, in his book Loving as Jesus Loves, maintains a biblical warrant that this magnificent bridegroom can ultimately represent the ultimate Bridegroom, Jesus, and this unblemished bride, both individually and collectively, the ultimate bride, his Church (1-5).

I will acknowledge that Solomon himself probably was not thinking of God as the bridegroom and his bride as the Church. Nevertheless, when Jeremiah spoke of great weeping, he surely was not envisioning Herod's slaughter (Jer. 31:15; Matt. 2:8). When Hosea wrote of God calling his son out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1), he appears to have been referring only to the Exodus, yet Matthew interprets the young Jesus' and his parents' exodus from Egypt as fulfilling Hosea's statement (Matt. 2:15). In the very same way, Jesus and his Church fulfill or bring fullness to the bridegroom and bride of the Song of Solomon. Solomon is presented as a "type" of the eternal Bridegroom-King, and the bride as a "type" of the bride of Christ. The tracing of the motif of God as husband and his people as his bride throughout Scripture supports this contention well.

1. God takes Israel to be his wife at Sinai (Deut. 7:7-8; Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16:8). Here was the time of Israel's choosing. She was chosen first by God not because she was lovely but because God is love and chose to love her. As Moses told Israel, the Lord set his love upon them "because the Lord loved you" (Deut. 7:7-8).

2. Israel continuously commits adultery through her brazen idolatry (Exod. 32; Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16:28; Hos.). Even while Moses was on the mountain receiving the commandments, God's new bride was already involved in idolatrous adultery. Such unfaithfulness would soon become the norm and not the exception. This unfaithfulness would continually break God's heart and ultimately bring his judgment.

3. God looks forward to a time when he will know Israel as a faithful wife who genuinely knows the Lord (Hos. 2:19-20; Isa. 62:4-5). God is always the God of new beginnings. He is incorrigibly redemptive. He is full of patience and grace. He will not give up on his harlot. He will work, and he will wait. Ultimately he will give his life for, apparently, no price is too high to pay and no time too long to wait in the heart of the divine Husband in order to bring his unfaithful wife home.

4. Jesus of Nazareth is introduced by John the Baptist as the Bridegroom (John 3:28-29). Here, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus is introduced as the Bridegroom. Finally, then, the Bridegroom has become flesh. Finally, the Bridegroom has come for his bride, Israel. The Bridegroom is the one who, upon the sound of his voice, causes his close friend not only to rejoice but rejoice fully. The Bridegroom is also the one who must increase and before whom his friend must decrease.

5. Jesus the Bridegroom is rejected by faithless Israel, his would-be bride (Matt. 21:33-42). Once again, God is rejected by his bride, Israel. In fact, this heartless bride will go so far as plotting to murder her Bridegroom. She is absolutely unwilling to decrease and equally averse to his increasing. Whereas until this time she committed adultery against him, now she will seek to dispose of him forever.

6. The Church of Jesus Christ becomes God's new Israel (Acts 2; Rom. 2:28-9; Gal. 6:16). The divine Bridegroom has always had a remnant of faithful lovers. In the New Testament, true faithfulness to God is always exhibited by true faithfulness to Jesus Christ, for those of the true Israel are those whose hearts have been circumcised. The true Church is his true Israel.

7. This new Israel, the Church, is the present-day bride of Christ, fulfilling Hosea

2:19 (Eph. 5:21-32). In the Church, God finally has the bride about whom he spoke through Hosea. The divine Bridegroom has now died (and risen) for this bride in order to make her fully his. While this bride is not yet ready to be married to her Bridegroom, the day is coming when she will be without spot or wrinkle, fully prepared for him. Her Bridegroom is continually doing this preparation.

8. This bride is presently betrothed to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2-3). Though this bride has not yet been married, she is, nevertheless, betrothed to him. She wears his engagement ring. He has chosen her for himself, and she has responded with a great “yes.” In this time of betrothal, she must remain pure and faithful to him as well as give her life for the purpose of pursuing, knowing, and representing him.

9. The Bridegroom will one day return to earth, bringing part of his bride, to receive the remaining members of his bride unto himself (I Thess. 4:16-17). When the divine Bridegroom first came for his bride, Israel, he was rejected and killed. Now, on the last day, he comes again. This time he comes in all his power and glory. The time of betrothal is finally over. God has been waiting for this moment ever since Sinai. The time has come. C. S. Lewis, in his final chapter of his final episode of the Chronicles of Narnia, describes this moment:

The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream ended this morning. And as he spoke He [Aslan, a Lion who represents Jesus] no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. (Last Battle 183)

10. The actual, eternal heaven and new marriage between Jesus the Lamb and his

bride will then take place in the new earth, at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9; 20:2; 21:1-2, 9). Today in this betrothed state of expectancy, the bride and the Spirit are yet inviting all to become the bride of this Bridegroom-Lamb through his blood (Rev. 7:14). Here is both our end and our calling. John Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress describes the moment when his bride shall hear that great invitation:

Now while they were drawing thus towards the gate, behold a company of the heavenly host came out to meet them; to whom it was said by the other two Shining Ones, "These are the men who have loved our Lord when they were in the world, and that have left all for His holy Name; and He hath sent us to fetch them, and we have brought them thus far on their desired journey, and they may go in and look at their redeemer in the face with joy." Then the heavenly host gave a great shout, saying, "Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9). (147)

Clearly this theme of God as Bridegroom and the believer as his bride is a major motif woven throughout Scripture. It magnificently illustrates God's loving actions in his history of salvation. Chapter 2, therefore, maintains that the Song of Solomon is a picture of and "type" of both an ideal bridegroom and a healed and ideal bride, illustrating in many ways that ideal relationship of Jesus the Bridegroom to his Church and vice versa.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a ten-session group study of the Song of Solomon on the participants' relationship with Christ, their self-awareness, and their use of these three classical devotional practices: *Lectio Divina*, Breath Prayer, and Divine Office. This group was a volunteer, self-selected group of regular attendees of the Trinity United Methodist Church and the First United Methodist Church of Interlachen, Florida. The ten-week program was designed to enable the small group to grow in their relationship to Christ as well as their self-awareness.

Research Question 1

What changes occurred in the participants' relationship with Christ as a result of participating in this study?

Research Question 2

What changes occurred in the participants' self-understanding as a result of participating in the study?

Research Question 3

What particular elements in the study were most effective in producing changes in the participants?

Definition of Terms

Particular terms used throughout this project require definition. Many of these definitions are discussed at length. Following is a compilation of those terms along with their brief definitions.

Breath Prayer

The *Breath Prayer* is a specific, brief prayer that may be repeated, silently or audibly, numerous times during one's day as a means of obeying the apostles' command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17; Luke 18:1).

Divine Office

Otherwise known as the Liturgy of the Hours or The Work of God, the *Divine Office* is the official prayer of the Roman Catholic Church. It marks off specific parts of the day as particularly consecrated to God. Praying the Hours thus enables Christians the opportunity to set their daily life apart for Christ and his purposes in conjunction with the beginning and ending themes of each day, thus making it an offering to God.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a method of prayer that is translated as “sacred reading.” It becomes a ladder whereby prayer is intensified. It originally involved four steps: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Two more steps, silence and obedience, have recently been added; silence is placed at the beginning and obedience at the end.

Masters

The *Masters* are those very few Christian writers whose lives and writings have, throughout the history of the Christian Church, been recognized by the Church as distinguished, proven, and worthy of continued attention through the ages.

Shame

In this project I will be dealing with unhealthy shame. Healthy shame simply lets human beings know that they are limited and finite, thus helping them to healthily accept these limits. John Bradshaw, in his book Healing the Shame That Binds You, writes of another type of shame, the type this project examines:

Toxic shame, the shame that binds you, is experienced as the all-pervasive sense that I am flawed and defective as a human being. Toxic shame is no longer an emotion that signals our limits, it is a state of being, a core identity. Toxic shame gives you a sense of worthlessness. Toxic shame is a rupture of the self with self. (10)

This type of *shame* may be experienced as an unhealthy response by a person who accepts and feels false (and not true) guilt. *Guilt* is a healthy response by a person who acknowledges and takes responsibility for their own sin. The antidote to guilt is to seek forgiveness. The antidote to this type of *shame* is not forgiveness for the *shamed* one has in the particular situation either not sinned or has already been forgiven for a particular sin. Rather, the antidote is healing grace.

Spiritual (Personal) Disciplines

A *spiritual (personal) discipline* is a chosen discipline offered to God on a regular basis out of a desire to love and obey God. Such disciplines always become means of grace and are given to God with no strings attached. Examples include personal prayer, Bible reading, and fasting.

Spiritual (Classical) Disciplines

The *spiritual (classical) disciplines* of the Church are found in three areas: prayer, liturgy, and spiritual reading. They provide the support structure for the personal disciplines. Examples include the *Lectio Divina* and Divine Office.

Spiritual Reading

Spiritual reading, as distinct from informational reading, is a means of grace whereby the reader seeks to be transformed by an intimate encounter with the divine Word. While *spiritual reading* primarily uses the Scriptures, the writings of the masters may also be used. I have also labeled this type of reading Spiritual Overlook Reading.

Context of the Study

The study took place in the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC) at the Trinity United Methodist Church in the city of Palatka, in Putnam County, Florida. Trinity United Methodist Church was founded in 1955. I have been privileged to be the pastor at Trinity since June 2001.

From a demographic perspective, the people of Trinity are generally middle class. In 2003, the average worship attendance was 127 and the average Sunday school attendance was 60. For many years the membership hungered for and possessed a willingness to attend small group Bible studies. I recently sought to begin a new Sunday

school class and immediately was blessed with ten adults per week. All age groups are well represented at Trinity.

Description of the Project

The project was experienced in a small group format consisting of nine men and three women. They ranged in age from their 40s to their 70s. We met weekly for ten consecutive weeks on Tuesday evenings from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. All members were required to sign a group covenant (see Appendix E). The weekly program was as follows.

1. Beginning with week three, I led a discussion asking, “Where did God meet you in your *Lectio* or Divine Office?” Homework was also turned in at this time.
2. Members were divided into three small groups, and each group was placed in a different room. They were given a selection from one of the masters. Here they were to read it and together answer questions. Finally, they were to pray for the needs of each other, which had been brought to light by that reading. (During this time I prepared refreshments.)
3. We came together for a time of worshipful singing (see Appendix D). I played piano and different members took turns leading the singing.
4. We returned to our original room and enjoyed refreshments. The members took turns in providing these.
5. I taught the group the weekly lesson. Discussion always ensued.
6. The homework for the following week was explained.
7. The first five weeks we closed by saying a unison prayer (see Appendix I) and the last five weeks by praying the evening or night services of the Divine Office in the Upper Room Worship Book.

Table 1.1. Description of the Project

Date	Theme	Primary Events
2 Sept.	Beginning to know Jesus as our Bridegroom-King	Discussion questions, small groups, Bible study
9 Sept.	<i>Lectio Divina</i> face-to-face: into the Bridegroom-King's chambers	Teaching the "scenic overlook" concept of reading, small groups, Bible study (includes history of Song of Solomon)
16 Sept.	The shaming of the bride	Group questions/discussion, small groups, singing. How was your <i>Lectio</i> at home? Bible study: shame theory and the bride.
23 Sept.	The healing of the bride	How was your <i>Lectio</i> ? Small groups, singing. Bible study: How the bride was healed; communion
30 Sept.	The Breath Prayer: walking alongside Him.	How was your <i>Lectio</i> ? Small groups, singing. Bible Study: The Breath Prayer.
7 Oct.	The Divine Office	How was your <i>Lectio</i> ? Small groups, singing. Bible study: using the Divine Office
14 Oct.	Pursuing the Bridegroom-King	How was your Divine Office? Small groups, singing. Bible study: how to pursue him
21 Oct.	When the Bridegroom-King calls	How was your Divine Office? Discussion questions, singing. Bible study: how to be pursued and caught
28 Oct.	How the Bridegroom-King desires to seal our hearts, Pt. 1	How was your Divine Office/ <i>Lectio</i> ? Small groups, singing. Bible study: developing a spiritual formation plan
4 Nov.	How the Bridegroom-King desires to seal our hearts, Pt. 2	How was your Divine Office/ <i>Lectio</i> ? Small groups, singing, individual sharing of formation plans, laying on of hands, prayer

Methodology of the Study and Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a ten-session group study of the Song of Solomon on the participants' relationship with Christ, their use of three classical devotional practices, and their self-awareness in a volunteer, self-selected group of regular attendees of the Trinity United Methodist Church. This was an evaluative study in the experimental mode utilizing a pre-, mid-, and posttest design with no comparison group.

In order to make these evaluations, I employed four types of testing, which I communicated to all who showed interest in being a part of the group. The first type was the Spiritual Formation Inventory (see Appendix E), which was given along with the pre-

and posttest interviews. The second type involved one-on-one, semi-structured interviews before and after the small group experience, which I did with each group member.

Thirdly, group members were given a weekly, preassigned journaling question, which was based the present week's (already taught) material. This question and the answer given was then handed in the following week, each week. Fourthly, I regularly recorded field notes, which were my own observations of the group as a whole as well as particular participants who reacted either positively or negatively.

I was concerned that this very loving and supportive group would be tempted, for my sake, to be quicker to share positive reactions than negative reactions to the curriculum and group process (see Appendixes B and C). Therefore, as I was continually receiving input from the group, I gently but regularly reminded them that in order for this project to be the most beneficial to them, future groups, and myself, they would need to be honest in their input.

Subjects

The subjects were volunteers who were members of Trinity UMC and the First UMC of Interlachen and who committed to participating, when at all possible, in all ten sessions, spending thirty to forty minutes daily in structured prayer and Bible study and completing the given assignments.

All members of Trinity United Methodist Church were invited to join this project through the monthly church newsletter. When only nine responded, I invited the membership of the Interlachen church to join us, using a bulletin insert.

The group consisted of nine women and three men apart from myself. Their ages ranged from those in their 40s to those in their 70s.

Delimitations and Generalizability

The goal of this study was to determine which factors contributed best towards leading people into a deeper relationship with Christ through a ten-session series using the Song of Solomon. Participants did not engage in an inductive Bible study as such but rather were led into those themes in the Song of Solomon that best enabled the group members to be drawn closer to their Bridegroom-King. This study did not seek to be exhaustive in its use of the classical disciplines. Rather, it sought, in a period of only ten weeks, to expose the group members to the above fare just enough to whet their appetites so that they would be adequately motivated to continue to use these classical disciplines as a means of affecting the transformation of their lives. Also, this was not a study for non-Christians or even for all church members; rather, it was for those who had a genuine desire to go deeper in their walk with Christ and were willing to pay the price of committing thirty to forty minutes daily.

This project has general relevance for pastors and leaders of laity who are committed volunteers as they seek to provide vehicles of spiritual formation for their churches. This relevance extends beyond the United Methodist Church to all Christian denominations.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 2 of this study establishes the biblical and theological context for the proposed project. Chapter 3 presents the research design. Chapter 4 presents the research findings. Chapter 5 offers a summary and interpretation of those findings as well as suggestions for future studies.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the following pages, the literature of the basic themes of this project is reviewed. Each theme is examined in regards to its biblical and theological foundations. Then this literature is used to form both a foundation and a framework for developing a curriculum for the ten-week small group experience, which fulfills the requirements as put forth in my purpose statement. Chapter 2 includes the following material: Interpreting the Song of Solomon, Spiritual Formation Practices, the *Lectio Divina* (Biblical and Theological Foundations), the Breath Prayer (Biblical and Theological Foundations), the Divine Office (Biblical and Theological Foundations), and the Threefold Aspect of Spiritual Direction. Instead of trying to cover any of the above exhaustively, I speak to them only as they relate to the ten-week small group experience.

Interpreting the Song of Solomon

Typology is a legitimate means for understanding the Song of Songs. Looking down the hallways of two thousand years of church history, typology is clearly the preferred method for interpreting the Song. The two legitimate methods for interpreting the Song of Solomon are literally and typologically. These two methods actually complement each other. As this issue is most important for interpreting the Song of Solomon, this study seeks to explain the meaning of typology as well as offer reasons to support the legitimacy of using typology to interpret certain Scriptures.

Bernard Ramm, in his book Protestant Biblical Interpretation, comments regarding the legitimacy of using typology as a means of interpreting Scripture:

The general relationship, which the Old Testament sustains to the New, is the very basis for such a study. The strong prophetic element in the Old

Testament establishes a real and vital nexus between the two Testaments. The fact of prophecy establishes that the New is latent in the Old, and that the Old is patent in the New. The form of prophecy may be either verbally predictive or typically predictive. The latter are those typical persons, things, or events, which forecast the age to come. Thus a type is a series of prophecy and should be included under prophetic study. Typological interpretation is thereby justified because it is part of prophecy, the very nature of which establishes the nexus between the two Testaments. (215-16)

He goes on to speak of Christ's typological usage of the Old Testament:

Our Lord's own use of the Old Testament is His invitation to us to find Him in the Old Testament. In Luke 24:25-44 Christ teaches the disciples about Himself, beginning at Moses and following through all the Scriptures. Luke 24:44 mentions the divisions of the Jewish canon (Moses, Prophets, Psalms,) thus making the reference as wide as the Old Testament canon. (Ramm 217)

Interpreting the Song of Solomon typologically without interpreting it allegorically is both possible and preferable. Ramm writes of the differences in allegorical interpretation and typological interpretation:

Allegorical interpretation is the interpretation of a document whereby something foreign, peculiar, or hidden is introduced into the meaning of the text giving it a proposed deeper or real meaning.

Typological interpretation is specifically the interpretation of the Old Testament based on the fundamental theological unity of the two Testaments whereby something in the Old shadows, prefigures, adumbrates something in the New. Hence, what is interpreted in the Old is not foreign or peculiar or hidden, but rises naturally out of the text due to the relationship of the two Testaments. (223)

The Westminster Dictionary of Theology speaks concerning the differences between typology and allegory:

Typology is a comparison of events or persons along a scale of time and is thus "historical," while allegory is anti-historical and makes the text into an indicator of eternal, often philosophical, truths. According to this view, typology is basic to the internal structure of the Bible, while allegory, though not completely absent, is marginal. (Richardson and Bowden 11)

Dennis Kinlaw, writing of the dangers of using the allegorical method to interpret

the Song of Solomon, demonstrates that once an author enters the allegorical arena, all kinds of unique interpretations can and do become possible. In his commentary of the Song of Solomon, Dr. Kinlaw illustrates this tendency:

The bride's two breasts in 4:5 and 7:8 have been variously interpreted as, "the church from which we feed; the two testaments; Old and New; the twin precepts of love of God and neighbor; and the Blood and the Water." (1203)

In that same commentary, Dr. Kinlaw, commenting on 8:13-14, writes of that which he describes as an "interesting echo":

The bride's call to her groom to hasten may find an interesting echo in Rev. 22:17. The heavenly call has always been that of a Divine Groom for a human bride. In the Song she invites him to come. In human history, he invites her to come. Love, Divine Love, calls to love, and love responds. "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" (1036)

While this project leaned more upon the typological interpretation of the Song of Songs than does Dr. Kinlaw, the typological concept of the "interesting echo" is expounded.

Typology and Allegory: The Chosen Means for Interpreting the Song of Solomon for the First Eighteen Hundred Years

Perhaps no book in the canon has a richer history than the Song of Solomon. To seek to understand this book without standing on the shoulders of the saints who have gone before would be a major error. Tremper Longman writes of how Judaism has viewed this book:

Early Jewish interpretations are predominantly allegorical... [h]owever, most Jewish allegorical interpretations begin with the idea that the man in the song is God and the woman is Israel. The Song of Songs then is not about what it seems to be on the surface, the sensual love between a man and a woman. It is actually about the love which God has for Israel. (24)

Rabbi Aquiba who lived around AD 100 states, "Whoever sings the Song of Songs with a tremendous voice in a banquet and so treats it as a sort of ditty has no share in the world to come" (qtd. in Longman 20). Aquiba speaks with equal emotion

concerning the authoritative status of the Song of Songs:

God forbid! No man in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs [that he should say] that it does not render the hands unclean. For all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. (qtd. in Longman 21)

Here, a leading Jewish Rabbi writes that while all the writings of Old Testament Scripture are holy, the greatest of all is the Song of Solomon. In using the Holy of Holies to describe this book, he is saying that the “Song” is a chief way to experience the presence of God. Today, relatively few would view the Song of Songs as the “Holy of Holies” of the Scriptures or even close to it.

A perusal of some of the Church Fathers finds a similar theme. Here they all agree that within the Song is the story of Jesus the divine Bridegroom and the Church who is his precious bride. Endel Kallas, in the Lutheran Quarterly, writes of the Song’s prominent place in church history:

This popularity of the Song of Songs ... can be observed within the literary history of interpretation. A cursory glance at the index to the Patrologia Latina amply demonstrates this fact. That index lists 32 Latin Commentaries on the Song of Songs written from the time of Jerome and Ambrose to Peter Damian in the eleventh century. By comparison the important epistle of Paul to the Galatians comes under study only six times, the epistle to the Romans only nine. Within the same time frame, the Gospels of Mark and John receive barely half the attention, with only thirteen and sixteen Latin studies within the index. (323)

C. S. Lewis explains this relationship of the Song and the Church fathers in an interview with a “Mr. Wirt.” In the book, God in the Dock, Lewis shares his view of the Song of Solomon:

Mr. Wirt: “An American writer, Mr. Dewey Beegle, has stated that in his opinion, the Isaac Watts hymn, ‘When I survey the Wondrous Cross’ is more inspired by God than is the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament? What would be your view?”

C.S. Lewis: “The great saints and mystics of the church have felt just the opposite about it. They have found tremendous spiritual truth in the ‘Song of Solomon.’ There is a difference of levels here. The question of the canon is involved. Also we must remember that what is meat for a grown person might be unsuited for the palate of a child.” (264)

Jerome, the early Church father, viewed the Song as typifying Christ and his Church and like C. S. Lewis thought that the Song was for the more spiritually mature.

This is evident in his instructions concerning the behavior of a young virgin girl:

Let her treasures not be silks or gems but manuscripts of the Holy Scriptures. Let her begin by learning the Psalter, and then let her gather rules of life out of the Proverbs of Solomon. From the preacher let her gain the habit of despising the world and its vanities. Let her follow the example set in Job of virtue and patience. Then let her pass on to the Gospels never to be laid aside when once they have been taken in hand. Let her also drink in with a willing heart the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles. As soon as she has enriched the storehouse of riches with these treasures, let her commit to memory the prophets, the Heptateuch, the book of Kings and of Chronicles, the rolls also of Ezra and Esther. When she has read all these things she may safely read the Song of Songs but not before: for were she to read it at the beginning, she would fail to perceive that, though it is written in fleshly words, it a marriage song of a spiritual bridal. And not understanding this she would suffer hurt from it. (God in the Dock 194)

Augustine, as well, understood the Song of Songs to be a text “whose plain meaning concerns Christ and the church” (Dove 320).

Bernard of Clairvaux who lived in the 1100s wrote eighty-six sermons on the Song of Solomon (On the Song of Songs). Though he wrote so many sermons, he only preached as far as 3:1. He was thus able to find an average of more than two sermons per verse. Longman writes of Bernard’s understanding of the Song’s prominent place in biblical teaching:

He considers the Song the epitome of Biblical teaching. Thus he addresses his sermons to the spiritually mature, his fellow monks and not the masses. He suggests that people cannot benefit from the Song until they have mastered the other two Solomonic books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, in

order to despise the world and the self. The song provides the more constructive lesson of building up one's mystical union with God. After all, the bride is the individual soul who desires God, and the groom is God. Their union is the desired mystical union between the two. (32)

Finally, here is the perspective of John and Charles Wesley. As a United Methodist, understanding their interpretation of the Song of Solomon is important for these biblical scholars represent Methodism's spiritual roots. John Wesley, in his Notes on the New Testament, writes of the purpose for the Song:

The design of the book is to describe the love and happy marriage, but it is not to be understood concerning Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter (although the occasion may be taken from that, or rather he makes an allusion to that) but concerning God, or Christ and His church and people.... This book is to be understood allegorically concerning the spiritual love and marriage between Christ and His church. (1926)

While John Wesley describes his type of interpretation of the Song of Songs as allegorical; given the above definitions of allegory and typology, he is best understood to mean that which was earlier defined as typological.

Speaking of, as did John Wesley, the forty-fifth Psalm, Kidner, in his commentary on that Psalm writes of the Song as referring to Christ and his Church:

This last point has implications for another example of wedding poetry, the Song of Songs, since by its language and title, "a love song," the psalm comes as clearly into the category of literal wedding verse as does the Song, yet speaks undoubtedly of Christ. It is proof enough that the one level of meaning need not exclude the other. (170)

While John Wesley was preaching and writing books, his brother Charles was writing hymns. The Song of Solomon played a prominent role in several of those hymns.

In his excellent book, The Wesley Hymns, Lawson has meticulously combed through many of Charles' hymns and provided Charles' Scripture references for each line of hymnody. He lists the following hymns and lines of those hymns as being influenced

by the Song:

1. "Jesu, Lover of My Soul" (88)

Jesu, lover of My Soul: Song Sol. 2:10

2. "See Where Our Great High Priest" (=first line) (42)

Jesu, on Thee we feed
 Along the desert way,
 Thou art the living Bread
 Which doth our spirits stay (Song Sol. 2:5)
 And all who in this banquet (Song Sol. 2:4)
 Lean on the staff of life divine

3. "Desiring to Love" (121)

For love I sigh, for love I pine (Song Sol. 2:5; 5:8)

4. "The Shepherd of Israel and Mine" (=first line) (16)

For closer communion I pine (Song Sol. 5:8)
 I long to reside where Thou art (3:4)
 The pasture I languish to find (1:7)
 Or rise to be hid in Thy breast (1:13)

5. "My God! I know, I feel Thee mine" (=first line) (145)

My God! I know, I feel Thee mine (2:16; 6:3)
 And will not quit my claim (3:4)

6. "Come All Who Truly Bear" (=first line) (169)

That He is ours and we are His (2:16)

7. "Jesu, We Thus Obey" (=first line) (173)

Our hearts we open wide (5:2)
 His house of banqueting is this (2:4)
 And He hath brought us here
 His banner over us is spread (2:4)

8. "Come We that Record" (=first line) (175)

Do this, and be fed with the love of the Lord (2:3-4)

9. I “Come and Let Us Sweetly Join” (first line) (188)

Come, and sit, and banquet there (2:4).

Lawson goes on to write, “Certainly we cannot understand the Wesleys’ attitude to Scriptural doctrine without taking full account of the method of allegory. It provides some of the most effective of Charles Wesley’s poetry and devotional writing” (39).

Concerning the hymn “Thou Shepherd of Israel, and Mine,” Lawson demonstrates Wesley’s understanding of the relationship between the bridegroom of the Song and the bridegroom of the Church:

The succeeding lines of this same hymn:

For closer communion I pine
I long to reside where thou art.
The pasture I languish to find
Where all who their Shepherd obey

contain allusions to the Song of Solomon ... 5:8, 3:4, and 1:7. It may indeed appear strange to many modern readers to understand the outspoken imagery of the Song of Solomon as an allegory referring to Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church. There has been a well-established tradition in the church that Canticles may be expounded with reference to Christ. The matter is clinched for this hymn because in the original, the Wesleys’ printed the reference Canticles 1:7 at the head. The explorer of Wesley must be mentally prepared to follow him into many spiritual and allegorical renderings of a variety of texts, which are of devotional rather than of academic value. (16)

Again, that for which Lawson would use the term allegory I would understand to mean in the truest sense, typology.

Key Themes from the Song of Solomon

Following are those key themes that arise from a typological interpretation (Chapter 2) upon which the Song of Solomon sections of the curriculum were based for this ten-week project.

Shame

The first of the key themes is based upon Song of Solomon 1:5-6:

Dark am I, yet lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the tent curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I am dark, because I am darkened by the sun. My mother's sons were angry with me and made me take care of the vineyards; my own vineyard I have neglected.

Other commentators such as Hudson Taylor, in his book Union and Communion, write that the bride's swarthy skin or blackness of skin is evidence of her sin, thus requiring confession and forgiveness (16). The text, however, does not speak of her committing sin thus producing guilt but rather of her having been abused thus producing shame. Her brothers, her companions who are the daughters of Jerusalem, and possibly her mother, have committed this abuse. Her need, therefore, is not to experience forgiveness but healing.

Her abuse seems to have begun by her brothers as they forced her to tend their own vineyards, which were their own responsibility. This abuse would have had at least three consequences. To begin, it would have caused her to ignore her own vineyard. Ignoring her vineyard would have appeared to others as a lack of responsibility on her part, thus potentially providing a personal sense of failure as well as incurring condemnation from others. The second consequence of this abuse would have been the rejection and lack of love she would have daily experienced from her very own brothers, thus pushing her towards feelings of worthlessness. The third consequence of this abuse from her brothers was that it caused her skin to suffer from overexposure to the sun, thus causing it to darken and, probably, dry.

Furthermore, her mother gives the appearance of abusing her daughter by

allowing her brothers to take advantage of her by forcing her to care for their vineyards and thus neglect her own. She clearly appears to be neglecting her daughter's rights and needs, favoring her sons over and at the expense of her daughter. Thus, her mother (whether true or not) communicates to her daughter that she is relatively unimportant and insignificant, being worth less than her cruel and unloving brothers. That the daughter blames her mother for allowing this abuse is alluded to in 1:5-6 where she calls her abusive brothers, "my mother's sons."

The third type of abuse is delivered by her companions who deride her for her dark, swarthy skin. This verbal abuse could easily bring with it feelings that she is inferior and undesirable. In short, she is shamed. Yet, she is not guilty and has not sinned here. She is not at fault. Thus she bears no true guilt, but she has been shamed and shamed horribly. Her need, therefore, is not to experience forgiving grace but healing grace. While Longman does not use the term "shame," he certainly describes the bride as a victim and, therefore, not a guilty party:

Her discomfort is accentuated by her command that the other women not look at her.

Verse 6 makes it clear that the woman finds her scorched complex unattractive. Again, her reaction has nothing to do with race or some transcultural sentiment on the aesthetics of skin pigmentation. The *sun* [original emphasis] has burned her. She has been out in the fields working hard with the result that her skin is deeply tanned or sun burnt. Indeed her burn came as a result of labor that was forced on her by her brothers. She had to work vineyards at the insistence of her mother's sons. The woman clearly is not positively inclined towards them. Here ... they keep her from acting upon her sexuality. (96-97)

This belief is further supported by a simple description and understanding of shame theory.

Dr. Sandra D. Wilson, in her book Released from Shame, and Dr. John

Bradshaw, in his book Healing the Shame That Binds You, write of differing types of shame, some of which are healthy and good while another type is destructive and evil. This latter type is summarized here, as it is the one experienced by Solomon's bride.

Bradshaw describes this destructive shame as toxic:

Toxic shame ... is a state of being, a core identity, which gives a person ... a sense of worthlessness. It is a ... rupture of the self with self. Here, the self becomes an object of its own contempt, an object that can't be trusted. Toxic shame is experienced as inner torment, a sickness of the soul. (10)

Sandra Wilson writes of this binding shame.

[Shame is] rooted in childhood experiences in the family and in children's limited capacity to accurately interpret them. Parents and other adults put obstacles of false teachings in children's paths. Because they believe these lies are truth and act on them the children might experience disastrous personal consequences. (29-30)

Thus, unrealistic expectations and/or abusive treatment teach the child lies such as "you are the kind of child who deserves disrespectful or dehumanizing treatment, that parents can do anything they want to you, and that God doesn't care" (31-32).

This abusive type of behavior and these unrealistic expectations were exactly the type of behavior experienced by the young girl who would one day become King Solomon's bride. Her self-image could have been permanently defaced. Clearly, her family and companions shamed her. Thus, the Song of Solomon tells of how the love of the Bridegroom-King took a young, potentially shamed girl and healed her into his bride, thus taking her from shame to song. Her healing is further evidenced by her magnificent self-image, which is completely free from the toxicity of shame, as is evident in the following verses:

I am the rose of Sharon, The lily of the valleys (Song Sol. 2:1).
 My beloved is mine, and I am his (2:16).
 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine (6:3).

I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me. (Song Sol. 7:10)

What an incredible self-image this formerly shamed bride possesses. One wonders where she could have obtained it. She certainly did not receive it from her mother, brothers, or companions. Surely it flows out of her relationship with her Bridegroom. Thanks to this unique relationship of healing love and grace, she is fully aware that she is

- the rose of Sharon,
- the lily of the valleys,
- the one who belongs to her beloved, and
- the one who is greatly desired by her beloved.

Truly, as Jeanne Guyon maintains in her book The Song of the Bride, the bridegroom has made her fair with his own beauty (7). Along with beautifying her, her Bridegroom-King also declares her to have magnanimous potential attainable through their relationship.

In the verses below, her potential is described:

A garden locked is my sister, my bride, A rock garden locked, a spring sealed up.
 Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, henna with nard plants,
 Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, With all the trees of frankincense, Myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices.
 You are a garden spring, A well of fresh water, And streams flowing from Lebanon.
 Awake, O north wind, And come, wind of the south; Make my garden breathe out fragrance, Let its spices be wafted abroad. May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits! (Song Sol. 4:12-16)

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases. (Song Sol. 2:7)

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the
hinds of the field, that you will not arouse or awaken my love until
she pleases. (Song Sol. 3:5)

I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem, Do not arouse or
awaken my love until she pleases. (Song Sol. 8:4)

The bridegroom looks at his bride, sees all that she can become, and communicates this possibility to her. In his eyes she is a garden locked and a spring sealed. He does not, therefore, condemn her for not having realized her potential. He does not compare her to others. Rather he prays for the wind (of the Spirit) to come over her (Ezek. 36:36; Acts 2) and exercises mercy and patience. He waits for her love, allowing her to progress at her own pace. He does not even allow others to push her. He stands in waiting, without condemning and shaming her for making him wait; however, he is not yet finished.

The bridegroom's public and unashamed love for his bride is expressed in 2:4: "He has brought me to his banquet hall and his banner over me is love." In younger days before she began to know her bridegroom, the bride had been the object of much public humiliation from her brothers, her mother, her companions, and from others who would have looked down upon her because her own vineyard was unkempt.

As these in her past publicly shamed her, now one is in her present and future who publicly accepts, embraces, and approves of her. The king's banquet was a public place. The king, not just anyone, by his actions publicly proclaims before the whole world, especially her former shamers, that he, the king has chosen her. Listen to her heart as she exclaims, "He has brought me to his banquet hall." She can not believe it. Not only is the king not ashamed of her, but he is proud of his relationship with her, has chosen

her, and she is his Song of Songs, the very best of all his songs. Before the world, with banners unfurled around them, he publicly proclaims to her, “I choose and love you.”

The curriculum showed that in the same way two-thousand years ago, a Bridegroom-King was publicly accused, condemned, and finally killed on a hill for all to see. In his public death for his people, he unashamedly announced that he desires them, loves them, and has chosen each person. Calvary became and still is the most magnificent public and unashamed display of love the world has ever seen or will ever see. His banner over his people is agape love: a cross of shame upon which he himself publicly chose to hang.

This cross, then, is a place where one may bring both one’s guilt and shame. One brings one’s guilt in order to receive forgiveness. One brings one’s shame to be healed by his public, unashamed display of agape love, demonstrated there, and poured out today by the living, resurrected Christ through his Holy Spirit. Those for whom he died react as Solomon’s bride does, but to a far greater extent. Charles Wesley writes of the subsequent amazement the bride of Christ experiences in his hymn “And Can It Be”:

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior’s blood?
 Died He for me who caused Him pain, for me who Him to death pursued?
 Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God should die for me?
 Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God should die for me? (363)

Nevertheless, this Bridegroom-King does still more for his bride, for her healing from shame is not yet complete. The healing of her memories is seen in these verses:

On my bed night after night I sought him Whom my soul loves; I sought him but did not find him.
 I must arise now and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I must seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him but did not find him.
 The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, And I said,
 “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”

Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves; I held on to him and would not let him go until I had brought him to my mother's house, And into the room of her who conceived me.
(Song Sol. 3:1-4)

In reality the bridegroom was never really lost, nor had he left her for long.

Perhaps she began to fear that he had left her or perhaps she simply suddenly craved his nearness. To understand her heart requires first asking why she was suddenly possessed by such an unusual need as virtually to drag him to the house and room wherein her mother had conceived her. Perhaps while on her bed (vs. 1), she suddenly experienced remembrances of her past shame and abuse. Now she must not only find him but also require him to come to this place of her beginnings. She has already received his healing love in the present. Now, somehow, she must know this healing for her past. This past as has already been noted consisted of many deep wounds. She longs to get her bridegroom back into her past as well; therefore, she takes him into the room of her conception, bringing, as best she can to her furthestmost past, her bridegroom with all his healing love and acceptance. As she holds tightly to him in this room of her beginnings, his unconditional love begins to overcome, conquer, and transcend her painful memories of abuse and subsequent shame. She is beginning to allow his light to expose and expel darkness that has been hidden far away in cavernous regions deep within her heart of hearts. He speaks to those deep regions saying:

Though I only recently became your bridegroom, I have always known and loved you. When you were conceived, I was there, rejoicing! When your mother was in labor with you, I was there, rejoicing! When you were born I was there, rejoicing! You have always given me cause to sing!
(Maddox)

She is being healed.

Later, he will tell her "my perfect one, is unique, the only daughter of her mother,

the favorite of the one who bore her.” Her bridegroom-king brings healing by correcting her long-held misconception regarding her mother. Whereas in 1:5-6 the brothers’ abuse appears to be a result of her mother’s favoritism towards them and lack of love towards her, she now learns that she herself was actually her mother’s favorite. No doubt then, the brothers’ abuse of their sister broke her mother’s heart as well. For some unknown reason then, this mother was powerless to stop the horrible abuse. Long-held resentment toward her mother would now be free to melt away.

The bride’s exclamation at the end of the Song is the final evidence of her healing:

Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he entrusted the vineyard to caretakers. Each one was to bring a thousand shekels of silver for its fruit.

My very own vineyard is at my disposal; the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon, and two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit.
(Song Sol. 8:11-12)

At one time in a young girl’s life, a vineyard had been a place of abuse and shame, a place she would have grown to despise. No doubt in those painful years, she would have exclaimed many times, “I will never, ever care for another vineyard again.” Even after her actual abuse was over, her shame would have stayed with her, coloring her self-image and the way she would have viewed her world. Jean Vanier, in his book

Community and Growth, describes these results of shame in a child’s life:

When a child feels it does not belong to anyone, it suffers terrible loneliness and this is manifested in anguish. Anguish is like an inner agitation which affects the whole body, transforming the digestive and sleep patterns, bringing confusion, destroying all clarity about what to do, and how to act. It closes the child in on itself in feelings of uselessness and death, but also of anger and hatred which are intolerable. A child that feels unloved, knows it is not lovable; it is not good; it is evil. Loneliness is quickly transformed into terrible feelings of guilt. (13)

Her need, as has already been demonstrated, is not to be forgiven but healed. The feelings of guilt that she believes possess her are actually feelings of shame.

Somehow, from somewhere, a transcendent love from outside her wounded self must come to her. Such an all-encompassing, glory-sharing, healing love will only be found in relationship to her bridegroom.

Throughout their relationship he has been patiently and gently offering her healing. Throughout this healing relationship, he has been slowly but surely reintroducing her to vineyards as he has been replacing her abuse with respect, her wounds with wholeness, her rejection with acceptance, and her shame with kingly glory. In the first seven chapters of the Song, vineyards are mentioned eight times. The final evidence of her healing comes as Solomon gives her, of all things, a vineyard. Instead of fearing it, she embraces it. Where she had known only betrayal, she has learned to trust (her bridegroom). Instead of feeling shame, she senses victory. She says, “my very own vineyard.” (Song Sol. 8:12) Thanks to her all-encompassing relationship with her bridegroom, she now anticipates success in the same arena where she (through no fault of her own) had known only failure and shaming.

She then recognizes this new success as a gift of his grace and thanks him by returning one thousand shekels to him. A magnificent difference exists between the abuse and shaming of 1:6 and the victory of 8:12. The reason for this great difference is her relationship with her bridegroom. She has gained so much. Yet of all gains, her very best gift, her very greatest gain is the bridegroom himself. At a wedding, receiving generous wedding presents is wonderful, but for this bride and for Jesus’ bride, the Church, the greatest gift of all is that the King has become her Bridegroom.

This story, throughout the ten-week project sought to communicate the miracle of the Bridegroom-King taking his bride from shame to song.

The Priority of “Being” within the Relationship

The second key theme as concerns the Song of Songs is that once a person is born again and becomes a Christian, his or her Christianity consists primarily of a relationship that is “being” and only secondarily of “doing.” This relationship, while initiated by the Bridegroom-King, is to be continually dynamic, inviting the bride to be sought and to seek, to respond and initiate. This recurring truth is first expressed in 1:2-4:

May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine.
Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, your name is like purified oil;
therefore the maidens love you.
Draw me after you and let us run together! The king has brought me into his chambers.

No words that can adequately describe the intimacy of a kiss. No imagination can comprehend the joy that immediately accompanies the sound of the name of one’s beloved. Such intimacy is the stuff out of which one’s devotional life is both created and for which it is created. Within the Song of Solomon is an amazing lack of rules and commands, which are so quickly associated with following Jesus. The only rule in this song is love. Beginning in the first few verses and continuing through the entire eight chapters, is a picture of a relationship (1) always dynamic, growing, and reciprocal; (2) exciting, never dry; and, (3) without codified subjugation.

Within verse four is the heartcry of the Church: “Draw me after you.” The bride greatly desires to give her full attention to her bridegroom but yet finds that she is pulled in so many different and competing directions. She knows that only his wooings and attractions will be able to overcome the powerful seductions of the many other voices in

her life. This heart cry is certainly the bride's prayer for her devotion to her bridegroom and is far too much like Hosea's morning cloud—here for a while and then suddenly gone.

In this same verse, two different types of communication are implied. These two types together comprise the devotional life. The first type is described as the bridegroom and bride running together. The bride is present with her bridegroom, but her full attention is not fixed upon him. They can talk to one another at any time, and she is free to fix her attention elsewhere while doing her daily service. Still they are constantly side by side, always in the presence of each other. More is said of this type of communication when referring to the "breath prayer."

The second type of communication is arguably the most precious. The bridegroom invites his chosen bride into his private chamber. He closes the door. Distractions must be prevented. Her whole heart must be directed to only him. While the above side-by-side style is the more frequent, this face-to-face time is the more intimate. Certainly such face-to-face intimacy is what God desires that our devotional time resemble. Because such intimacy is what he desires, Christians are reminded that they must not think of this devotional time as "mine" but "ours," for "I am my beloved's and his desire is for me" (Song Sol. 6:10).

Lord, Draw me after you. And as You do, enable my heart to feel and hear Your voice calling me to come apart unto You. Make a place for me to sit at Your, my Bridegroom's feet where I can hear Your every Word and clearly see Your face, thus enabling me to be transformed into Your image from one degree of glory to another. And make me, like Mary, to sit at Your feet. Be present to me; it's You I must meet. Distractions and worries surrounding my heart, Are coming between us. O make them depart. (Maddox)

Another passage that also illustrates this dynamic aspect of the relationship is Song of Solomon 3:1-4a:

On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but did not find him.

I must arise now and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I must seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him but did not find him.

The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, *and I said* [original emphasis],

“Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”

Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves; I held on to him and would not let him go.

This passage may be divided into eight stages:

1. Her self-deception: “On my bed I sought him”;
2. Her realization: “But did not find him”;
3. Her discontentment (implied): “I am not willing to remain in this state”;
4. Her resolve: “I will arise now”;
5. Her searching: “In the streets and in the squares”;
6. Her initial failure: “I sought him but did not find him”;
7. Her request to others for help: “The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, And I said, ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’”; and,
8. Her Success: “Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves; I held on to him and would not let him go.”

In this passage is an outstanding example of the bride taking responsibility for the relationship and pursuing the bridegroom. In the curriculum, much time was spent discussing ways in which the bride can successfully pursue him. A. W. Tozer illustrates the bride’s heart so well as he prays in his book, The Pursuit of God:

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need of further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray

Thee, that so I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away." Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long. In Jesus' name, Amen. (20)

In the same vein, Adrian van Kaam represents beautifully the Lord's heart's desire that his children ask and seek for him:

If you only knew that I am the incarnation of the Infinite love you have been longing for deep in your heart.
 If you only knew that My longing for you surpasses infinitely your longing for Me.
 If you only knew that I am burning with desire to fill you with the living water of grace and love, that my asking you anything is but a loving occasion for Me to touch you, to make you into a new person.
 If you only knew that I cannot do so without your being receptive to me, then you would ask me to give you a drink of divine compassion and I would give you a drink of that living water.
 To really reach you, I need your asking. (38)

As a means of enabling the group members to develop further this relationship of pursuing and asking, each member was given a compact disc (CD) of songs that especially relate to the Song of Solomon directly or indirectly. These are songs I wrote. Two very gifted and Spirit-filled ladies sing them. The goal was that listeners could better experience themselves as Christ's bride and him as their bridegroom (see Appendix D).

Finally, with regard to this second key theme, the Song was examined as a whole. While this entire book is about the Bridegroom-King and his bride, not until the end of the last chapter does the reader find the bride in her "doing" mode. Finally, in 8:12 the reader hears the now healed bride exclaiming, "My very own vineyard is at my disposal; the thousand *shekels* are for you, Solomon, and two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit." Until this moment, the Song is filled with only the "being" of relationship: pursuing and being pursued. How different this is from the typical picture of Christianity

so prevalent today, where “doing” for Christ is placed far above “being” with him. From this passage it is also seen that the serving of the bride flows from a relationship of gratitude and stewardship. The vineyard belongs to her Bridegroom-King, and by serving him, she is gladly able to return something to him.

All of this speaks volumes as to what kind of life genuinely pleases the Bridegroom. Jesus taught his disciples this lesson using the vine in John 15:4-5:

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me.
I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Here, as in the Song, the “abiding” takes priority and is to be the sole focus of the branch. Fruit bearing is not the focus but the natural result of a life that abides in Christ. Here, then, is the life that pleases God.

Responding Well to His Timely Overtures

The third key theme flows from the second and speaks to the importance of the bride’s heart being so eager for fellowship with her Bridegroom-King that she is found responding to him at the very time he calls. The Scripture from which this theme is based is Song of Solomon 5:2-6:

I was asleep but my heart was awake. A voice! My beloved was knocking:
“Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my perfect one! For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the damp of the night.”
“I have taken off my dress, How can I put it on *again*? I have washed my feet, how can I dirty them *again*?”
My beloved extended his hand through the opening, and my feelings were aroused for him.
I arose to open to my beloved; and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with liquid myrrh, On the handles of the bolt.
I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away *and* had gone!
My heart went out *to him* as he spoke. I searched for him but I did not find him; I called him but he did not answer me.

This devotional life is anything but an 8:00-5:00 job for which one punches a proverbial time clock with a specific and predictable beginning and ending time. Rather, to use an illustration from science, one's relationship to one's Bridegroom resembles the relationship between a container and the material within it. He is like a container that may change its shape at any moment for while he always does what is good, he is often doing something new and unpredictable. The issue one must face, then, becomes that of resembling a liquid or a solid—the willingness to continually conform to the (often new) shape of one's container as well as staying in a continual state of liquid for the shape of one's relationship may grow and change at any moment.

A large change exists in the above verses of the Song as the Bridegroom invites his bride to an unexpected and unplanned time of intimacy. If her response is liquid enough to take adequately the shape of this new opportunity, the potential for the next hour is immense. Unfortunately she responds by complaining that his request will cause her to be inconvenienced. Thus, at the moment of his appearing, she is selfishly more concerned to meet her convenience needs than she is to open her heart in love. Finally, she changes her mind and responds positively to his overture. She opens her door, but her beloved has already turned away and is gone. That *kairos* moment is gone forever, its opportunity forever lost. Nevertheless, her Bridegroom is full of grace; he will provide many other unexpected opportunities.

Bernard of Clairvaux writes of the genuine possibility that a Christian may miss his or her Lord's appearing:

Is it possible for spiritually alert individuals to miss a spiritual Bridegroom? He loves as much as he is loved. Why is he so elusive?

I can think of three explanations. It could be that we look for him at the wrong time, in the wrong way, or in the wrong location. All moments

are not equal. This is why the prophet says, "Seek the Lord while he may be found" (Isaiah 55:6). This implies an inappropriate time when he may not be found. The prophet goes on to say, "Call on him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). There must be occasions when he is not near.

"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:21). This is the time to seek and call. Right now. "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear" (Isaiah 65:24). (On the Song of Songs 130)

In The Sacrament of the Present Moment, Jean Pierre de Caussade writes

concerning this seeming tendency of Christ to play "hard to get":

Although Martha sought to please Jesus by waiting on him, Mary was content to sit at his feet. And yet he misled even her, for, while she was looking for him as she knew him, he appeared to her as a gardener. And when the Apostles saw Jesus they took him for a ghost. So God hides himself in order to raise souls up to that perfect faith which will discover him under every kind of disguise. For once they knew God's secret disguise is useless. They say: "See him! There he is, behind the wall, looking through the trellis, in at the window!" O Divine Love, conceal yourself, leap over our suffering, make us obedient!

Mystify us, arouse and confuse us. Shatter all our illusions and plans so that we lose our way, and see neither path nor light until we have found you, where you are to be found and in your true form-in the peace of solitude, in prayer, in submission, in suffering, in succour given to another, and in flight from idle talk and worldly affairs. And, having tried all the known ways and means of pleasing you and not finding you any longer in any of them, we remain at a loss until, finally, the futility of all our efforts leads us at last to leave all to find you henceforth, you, yourself, everywhere and in all things without discrimination or reflection. For, how foolish it is, O Divine Love, not to see you in all that is good and in all creatures. (18)

This tendency toward intentional hiding is seen in the life Jesus in Luke 24:28-29.

The risen Lord is conversing with two followers on resurrection Sunday. They are returning from Jerusalem discouraged, knowing only of Jesus' death. Jesus then appears to them as a stranger. As they converse, Jesus opens the Old Testament to them, explaining why the Messiah had to die. Then, comes a crucial point in the story:

And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. But they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us,

for it is *getting* toward evening, and the day is now nearly over.” So He went in to stay with them.

How seemingly odd that Jesus pretends to desire to go farther. Of this and other similar passages Bernard remarks, “It is entirely possible that the reason he is leaving is to make his presence all the more desirable” (On the Song of Songs 126). Certainly, he has whetted the two followers’ appetites. Now, they must be hungry enough to change their plans on what was already a sorrowful day. They must consider his company to be of sufficient value to be so inconvenienced. They do, and by inviting him in, they receive the revelation of a lifetime: they recognize Jesus.

They did not have to urge Jesus to stay with them. They could have deemed the inconvenience to simply be too great. They could have easily had other “more important things to do.”

Using the above passages, with the Holy Spirit’s empowering and leading, this study attempted to help members of Christ’s bride to be more sensitive to his wooing voice for when one says, “Yes,” immediately, the possibilities are truly endless.

Sealing Their Relationship

The fourth and final key theme upon which the curriculum was based was the bride’s desire and her Bridegroom-King’s implied willingness for the sealing of their relationship. This request is found in Song of Solomon 8:6-7:

Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, Jealousy is as severe as Sheol; its flashes are flashes of fire, the *very* flame of the LORD.

Many waters cannot quench love, nor will rivers overflow it; if a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, it would be utterly despised.

Speaking of this passage, Longman writes, “This verse is arguably the most

memorable and intense of the entire book. The woman beseeches the man to take full possession of her” (209).

How he shall take full possession of her is demonstrated in detailed steps at the end of the ten-week curriculum. The Bridegroom-King must continually be allowed to have fuller and fuller possession of his follower’s life by continuing to place his follower’s heart in the midst of his means of grace, as this bride has already been doing. The three classical means of spiritual formation as found in Susan Annette Muto and Adrian van Kaam’s book, Epiphany Manual, are most helpful (13-16).

Finally, this sealing points to and offers a foretaste of what will finally be the perfect marriage. In this life we long for such a marriage, but because both partners are at best somewhat sinful, such a marriage is impossible and hopes are often dashed. Nevertheless, at the marriage of the Lamb, when Christ the Bridegroom-King shall marry his Church, that longed-for experience of the perfect marriage will be forever fulfilled.

The Threefold Aspect of Spiritual Direction

The first of these aspects is found in Mark 1:35: “In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left *the house* [emphasis mine], and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.” Private, secluded praying is known as spiritual self-formation. Through such praying, like Jesus, the Christian also gets away from everything and everyone but God. The reading of Scripture and the masters, along with prayer, are the key ingredients. Henri J. M. Nouwen writes of the Christian’s need for solitude:

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that he is actively present in our lives – healing, teaching, and guiding—we need to set aside a time and a space to

give him our undivided attention.

One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.

This is the experience of anyone who decides to enter into solitude after a life without much spiritual discipline. At first, the many distractions keep presenting themselves. Later, as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw. (95-96)

The second type of spiritual formation is seen in Acts 2:42: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Muto and Kaam describe this formation-in-common:

This is the most basic kind of formation. [It] implies that we open ourselves honestly and humbly to life call disclosures that may come to us—insofar as we are readied by grace to receive them—from such common sources and ways of formation as: participating in shared special reading groups; listening attentively to a well-prepared homily, sermon, lecture, or conference. (15)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, writes of this type of spiritual formation:

But God has put this Word into the mouth of others in order that it may be communicated to us. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find his living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of a man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth.

He needs his brother as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.

And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God permits them to meet together and gives them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and this "alien righteousness." All we can say, therefore, is: the community of Christians springs solely from the Biblical and Reformation message of the justification of man through grace alone; this alone is the basis of the longing of Christians for one another. (22-23)

The third type of spiritual formation, called formation-in-private, is a one-on-one type of direction continually available through the masters and the classical works of Christian spirituality. Actual (live) directors normally are used only in short-term emergency situations. As Timothy had Paul, so Christians need those spiritually mature persons who can, with the help of Scripture and the (other) Masters, help them see their lives through God's eyes. Paul writes of this relationship with Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:17. "For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church."

Francis De Sales, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, speaks of this very important relationship:

Young Tobias, being commanded to go to Rages, answered, I know not the way: Go then, replied his father, and seek some man to conduct thee. I say the same to thee my Philothea; would you walk in earnest towards devotion, seek some good man who may guide and conduct you: this is the best advice I can give you. Though you search for the will of God (says the devout Avilla) you shall never so assuredly find it as in the way of devout obedience, so much recommended and practiced by all holy persons who aspire after devotion.

But who shall find this friend? They that fear the Lord, answers the wise man: that is the humble who earnestly desire their spiritual advancement. Since then it concerns you so much Philothea, to travel with a good guide on this holy road to devotion, beseech God, with the greatest importunity, to furnish you with such a one as may be according to His own heart; and be assured he will rather send you an angel from heaven ... than fail to grant your request. (25-27)

Spiritual Formation Practices

The Church for most of its history has used each of the following methods.

The *Lectio Divina*: Biblical Foundations

In his book *Invitation to a Journey*, Dr. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. writes, "Lectio

is a posture of approach and a means of encounter with a text that enables the text to become a transforming encounter with God” (112). In Prayer and Temperament, Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey write of the *Lectio*.

It is no surprise that it [*Lectio Divina*] is both one of the oldest and most popular of all forms of prayer in the Christian tradition. *Lectio Divina* is a method of prayer that goes back to the fourth and fifth centuries. Easily and quickly translated as “sacred reading” it can be that only; but using sacred reading as the base, it becomes a ladder of escalation or intensification. *Lectio Divina* is a method of prayer that is suitable for both the beginner and the spiritually advanced. Its progress from hearing the Word of God to studying it, reflecting upon it, praying upon it and adapting it to our situation leads one deeper and deeper into the longed-for union with God. (31-33)

Mulholland lists six steps within the *Lectio Divina*: silence, reading, meditation, response, contemplation, and obedience. Through the curriculum, the group members sought to incorporate these steps into their daily lives as they endeavored to live in Song of Solomon 1:4, “Draw me after you. The king has brought me into his chambers.” The members used the *Lectio Divina* as a major part of their daily, face-to-face chamber time. The six steps had within them many other smaller steps all interconnected, some of which have been borrowed from Mulholland’s book Invitation to a Journey (112-15). In the curriculum, the following steps were used.

Step 1: Silence (kneeling), a time of essential preparation. Silence is a time of preparation. Virtually all important events require preparation, and a Christian’s time with Christ is no different. People expect to prepare for everything from meals to examinations. No young girl in love with her beau would go out on a date without first preparing her body, yet so many Christians sit down to read the Scriptures without any preparation.

The monk Isaac, in John Cassian’s Conferences, writes as to the importance of

preparing well to pray:

The one accustomed to pray only when he bends the knee prays very little. Before the time of prayer we must put ourselves in the state of mind we would wish to have in us when we actually pray. It is an exorable fact that the condition of the soul at the time of prayer depends upon what shaped it beforehand. The soul will rise to the heights of heaven or plunge into the things of the earth, depending upon where it lingered before the time of prayer. (139-40)

Step 2: Reading (two versions of the Scriptures). Reading occurs when the individual simply opens the Scripture and reads. One may read a passage two or three times reading both quietly and audibly. The goal here must not be to read quantitatively but qualitatively.

In his book Shaped by the Word, Mulholland describes concerning how to read:

First, I suggest your top priority be to listen for God. Seek to allow your attention and focus to be on listening for what God is saying to you. Listen for God to speak to you in and through, around and within, over and behind, and out front of everything that you read. Keep asking yourself, "What is God seeking to say to me through all of this?" By adopting this posture toward the text you will begin the process of reversing the learning mode that establishes you as the controlling power who seeks to master a body of information. Instead you will begin to allow the text to become an instrument of God's control in your life.

The informational mode is only the "front porch" in the role of Scripture in spiritual formation. It is, you might say, the point of entry into the text. But once we have crossed the porch, we must enter into that deeper encounter with the Word, which is the formational approach. (22, 58)

Step 3: Meditation (begin journaling). Meditation involves thinking, understanding, and comprehending that which has been read. Journaling often proves to be very beneficial. I sought to explain this deeper level of reading by illustrating what I call the "Scenic Overlook Concept." I shared with the class that when riding on the Blue Ridge Parkway that the riders' primary goal is rarely to get from point "A" to point "B." Rather, they ride slowly and expectantly because they know that soon a beautiful

overlook will appear and the informed riders are looking for it. When the riders discover such an overlook that sparks their interest, they usually engage in the following steps:

- a. slow down,
- b. pull off the road,
- c. park the car,
- d. shut the engine off,
- e. get out,
- f. take a deep breath,
- g. forget about everything else,
- h. stand and stare,
- i. walk up and down,
- j. take it in,
- k. forget that time exists,
- l. live there, and
- m. reflect, consider, and then speak.

Those who read the Scriptures and meditate therein know that an overlook will soon come and so read (slowly and expectantly) in such a way that they are primarily searching for that special overlook. They are continually asking the Holy Spirit to reveal their particular overlooks. Upon seeing them, the readers stop and allow themselves to experience the above-mentioned steps. They have now found treasure.

Step 4: Prayer (responding to his Word to me in steps two and three). Prayer is an honest, affective, and cognitive response to God regarding that upon which one has been meditating.

Step 5: Contemplation (kneeling). Contemplation is a passive response to God's active love and presence as revealed to the seeker in the first four steps.

Step 6: Obedience (into his world). Obedience is the active response of the individual to the light given by God in steps one through five.

The *Lectio Divina*: Theological Foundations

David W. Cotter writes of the concept of *Lectio Divina*, which can be traced as far back as "the rule of St. Benedict":

Benedict was thoroughly immersed in the two hundred years of monastic tradition that preceded him. He makes greater use of St. Augustine.... He knows the Egyptian sources... St. John Cassian, as well as St. Basil. Other early Latin monastic writings ... were also known and used by him.

Saint Benedict would not have seen himself as an innovator. His way was simply the monastic way. His task was to codify that way for his own community and other communities, which might find the system useful. His way was marked by moderation in all things, the simplicity of a life lived in common, reticence in speech, humble obedience to a spiritual master, the willingness to allow personal ambition and career to be set aside for the good of the community, work and prayer, and a discipline known as *lectio divina*.

There is no explanation of *lectio divina*, prayerful reading of Scripture, in the Rule, so much was it a part of monastic culture. It is already assumed in the very first word Benedict wrote, "Listen." *The monk was formed by constantly listening to God's Word in Scripture* [emphasis mine]. This was of course the effect of the daily Divine Office, but it extended beyond this as they worked and rested. Lacking easy access to books, the monk memorized as much of Scripture as possible and meditated on it throughout the day ... by quietly repeating them over and over ruminating upon their meaning. *This rumination moved the monk to prayer and prayer moved the monk to love. In this way the monk sought to be transformed into another Christ, to "prefer nothing whatever to Christ* [emphasis mine]." (2, 3, 6)

Such transformation, throughout the history of the Church since the fourth and fifth centuries, has been the reason for the existence of the *Lectio Divina*. It is the reason why the *Lectio* was a significant part of the project.

The Breath Prayer: Biblical Foundations

The call to prayer rings throughout the Scriptures. All of the great men and women of God in the Scriptures were great in the area of prayer. The Scriptures call us over and over again to prayer. From the days of the early Church, prayer and methodology have made for a good marriage.

Nevertheless, many would fully divorce the concept of prayer from “methods.” They would maintain that if the Spirit inspires one’s prayers, we do not need humankind’s methods. Jesus says in Matthew 6:7, “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.” Certainly, then, liturgical praying is an oxymoron if one ever existed.

One may inquire as to the possibility that the Spirit would inspire methods also. As Christians gladly maintain the legitimacy of multiple methods of evangelism, I would encourage them to also acknowledge the legitimacy of multiple methods of prayer. Such an acknowledgement would signal the possibility of a significant paradigm shift for evangelical and non-liturgical Protestants in the all-important area of prayer and spiritual formation, a shift that is actually a shift back to the practices of the historic Christian Church.

One of the methods the Church has long embraced is the breath prayer. A brief, simple prayer, easily memorized, is prayed with great repetition, so much so that it becomes the song of one’s heart. Like a song that one has heard and cannot escape, this prayer becomes so engraved into the worshipper’s heart that it is less than a breath away. When used to its fullness, it is prayed consciously or subconsciously as often as the believer breathes. In fact, this prayer then becomes the breath of the worshipper’s soul.

For years, the Church has heard the Scriptural command in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and Luke 18:1: “Pray without ceasing.” Matthew 7:7-8 tells this same truth:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Here, the words, “ask,” “seek,” and “find” are in the present tense, denoting continuous action. Here again is the command, then, to pray without ceasing. Many have so desired this and yet, at the same time, found themselves oceans away. The breath prayer, which goes back to the very early Church fathers, is historically one of the greatest means for beginning to enter into such prayer. More is said about the Church fathers in the next section.

The Breath Prayer: Theological Foundations

Speaking of the great Church father John Cassian, Colm Luibheid, in his preface to The Classics of Western Spirituality, writes:

[B]orn in what is now Rumania, he traveled to the Holy Land, then throughout Europe, then to Constantinople and Rome, and by the time of his death around the year 435, he had moved to the south of Gaul. His travels brought him into contact with men and women of numerous backgrounds and circumstances. (xi)

Out of these travels and meetings, Cassian wrote his Conferences.

In Conference Ten he speaks specifically about prayer. Returning to the monk, Isaac, Cassian and his fellow seekers desire to know more regarding prayer. They communicate the following desire:

The following we humbly feel would be the principles. First [is] to know the method of finding and holding God in our thoughts. Second would be to hold unshakably to this method, whatever that may be, for in this perseverance, we feel, lies the ultimate perfection.

Hence our anxiety to find a formula which will enable us to think of God and to hold incessantly to that thought so that, as we keep it in view,

we may have something to return to immediately whenever we find that we have somehow slipped away from it. It will be there for us to take up once more without wasting time in searches or in painful detours. (131)

In John Cassian's Conferences, Isaac responds by remarking that their question demonstrates the purity of their hearts for only a few ever come to ask such a question:

I am not suggesting that you are simply at the doorway of true prayer. Rather your experience is such that you have touched upon the very central hidden mystery of prayer and have taken some hold of what it really is. And with the Lord as my guide it will not be too difficult to bring you in from the porch, where you walk uncertainly, and to lead you into the inner sanctum. Nor will you be prevented from understanding what I wish to show you. One is very close to knowledge when one clearly recognizes the questions to be asked. (132)

Isaac then goes on to tell them of the breath prayer, though he does not use those exact words. In doing so, he recommends a specific verse. Throughout the ages, other spiritual masters have recommended different verses, but the instructions as to their usage are very, very similar:

And what follows now is the model to teach you, the prayer formula for which you are searching. Every monk who wants to think continuously about God should get accustomed to meditating endlessly on it and to banishing all other thoughts for its sake. But he will not hold onto it unless he breaks free from all bodily concerns and cares. This is something which has been handed on to us by some of the oldest of the Fathers and it is something which we hand on to only a very few of the souls eager to know it: To keep God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: "Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue" (Psalm 69:2). (Cassian 132)

Today, in Protestant Bibles this Scripture is found in Psalm 70:1.

The author, Cassian, writes of the frequency of the usage of this prayer:

The thought of this verse should be turning unceasingly in your heart. Never cease to recite it in whatever task or service or journey you find yourself. Think upon it as you sleep, as you eat, as you submit to the most basic demands of nature. Sleep should come upon you as you meditate on the verse. This verse should be the first thing to occur to you when you wake up. The soul must grab fiercely onto this formula so that after saying

it over and over again, after meditating upon it without pause, it has the strength to reject and to refuse all the abundant riches of thought. (135-36)

Another highly significant and traditional use of the breath prayer is found in the use of the “Jesus Prayer.” An outstanding explanation of the “Jesus Prayer” is found in the classic of Russian spirituality, The Way of a Pilgrim and the Pilgrim Continues His Way. Here is the story of a Christian who hears a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without Ceasing.” Nevertheless, no instructions are given the pilgrim as to how to do it. After hearing more sermons on prayer but none on how to pray continuously, he sets out, seeking to find someone to help him. He simply will not be denied. Finally, he meets a spiritual advisor who begins to answer his need:

To pray always ... is the mother of all spiritual blessings. “Capture the mother, and she will bring you the children,” said St. Isaac the Syrian. Learn first to acquire the power of prayer and you will easily practice all other virtues. But those who know little of this from practical experience and the profoundest teaching of the holy Fathers have no clear knowledge of it and speak of it but little.

We went into his cell and began to speak as follows. “The continuous interior prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart, while forming a mental picture of His constant presence, and imploring His grace, during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep. The appeal is couched in these terms, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.’ One who accustoms himself to this appeal experiences as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always that he can no longer live without it, and it will continue to voice itself within him of its own accord. Now do you understand what prayer without ceasing is?” (French 9-10)

The pilgrim then goes on many journeys, continuing both to learn of and to teach the prayer, which eventually becomes, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner” (French 137).

At one point after significant time has elapsed, he speaks of the consolation brought him by this prayer:

The prayer of my heart gave me such consolation that I felt there was no happier person on earth than I, and I doubted if there could be greater and fuller happiness in the kingdom of heaven. Not only did I feel this in my own soul, but the whole outside world also seemed to me full of charm and delight. Everything drew me to love and thank God: people, trees, plants, and animals. I saw them all as my kinsfolk; I found on all of them the magic of the name of Jesus. Sometimes I felt as light as though I had no body and were floating happily through the air instead of walking. Sometimes when I withdrew into myself, I saw clearly all my internal organs and was filled with wonder at the wisdom with which the human body was made. Sometimes I felt as joyful as if I had been made czar. And at all such times of happiness, I wished God would let death come to me quickly and let me pour out my heart in thankfulness at His feet. (French 93)

A little while later, he meets an elderly lady:

After a while I heard the old woman that was sitting in the corner ceaselessly whispering the prayer of Jesus. It gave me great joy to hear the Lord's most holy name spoken so often, and I said to her, "What a good thing it is, mother, that you are always saying the prayer. It is a most Christian and most wholesome action."

"Yes," she replied. "The 'Lord have mercy' is the only thing I have to lean on in my old age."

"Have you made a habit of this prayer for long?"

"Since I was quite young, yes, and I couldn't live without it, for the Jesus prayer saved me from ruin and death." (French 98-99)

Later in the book is found more regarding this prayer:

He sees that truly to pray means to direct the thought and the memory, without relaxing the recollection of God, to walk in His divine presence, to awaken oneself to His love by thinking about Him, and to link the name of God with one's breathing and the beating of one's heart. He is guided in all this by the invocation with the lips of the most holy name of Jesus Christ, or by saying the Jesus prayer at all times and in all places and during every occupation, unceasingly. (French 163-64)

To reflect well upon these quotes is to simply stand in awe. May God grant the discipline to so live and the life to so impart.

The Divine Office: Biblical Foundations

Many who have gone on retreats have been exposed to the experience of the

Divine Office or, as otherwise known, the Liturgy of the Hours. The Catholic Encyclopedia says, “This expression signifies etymologically a duty accomplished for God; in virtue of a Divine precept it means, in ecclesiastical language, certain prayers to be recited at fixed hours of the day or night” (Cabrol). The biblical foundations for such a concept are found readily in the prayer book of the Bible, the Psalms. Here, the psalmist, at times, structures prayers according to the hour of the day. Some examples of such praying are found in the following verses:

The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime;
And His song will be with me in the night,
A prayer to the God of my life (Ps. 42:8)

I will remember my song in the night; I will meditate with my heart, and
my spirit ponders (Ps. 77:6)

It is good to give thanks to the LORD
And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High;
To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning
And Your faithfulness by night (Ps. 92:1-2)

O LORD, I remember Your name in the night,
And keep Your law (Ps. 119:55)

From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be
praised (Ps. 113:3)

May my prayer be counted as incense before You; the lifting up of my
hands as the evening offering (Ps. 141:2)

Let me hear Your lovingkindness in the morning;
For I trust in You. (Ps. 143:8)

The Divine Office: Theological Foundations

The Catholic Encyclopedia tells the following of the history of the Divine Office within the Church:

The custom of reciting prayers at certain hours of the day or night goes back to the Jews, from whom Christians have borrowed it. In the Psalms

we find expressions like: “I will meditate on thee in the morning”; “I rose at midnight to give praise to thee”; “Evening and morning, and at noon I will speak and declare: and he shall hear my voice”; “Seven times a day I have given praise to thee”; etc. (Cf. “Jewish Encyclopedia,” X, 164-171, s. v. “Prayer”). The Apostles observed the Jewish custom of praying at midnight, terce, sext, none (Acts, x, 3, 9; xvi, 25; etc.). The Christian prayer of that time consisted of almost the same elements as the Jewish: recital or chanting of psalms, reading of the Old Testament, to which was soon added reading of the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles, and at times canticles composed or improvised by the assistants. “Gloria in excelsis” and the “Te decet laus” are apparently vestiges of these primitive inspirations. At present the elements composing the Divine Office seem more numerous, but they are derived, by gradual changes, from the primitive elements. As appears from the texts of Acts cited above, the first Christians preserved the custom of going to the Temple at the hour of prayer. (Cabrol)

Historically, the Divine Office was and is a major part of The Rule of St.

Benedict. (Benedict lived between AD 480 and 547.) Recently, a Benedictine priest,

Father Anthony Delisi, Superior, wrote regarding the very great significance of this

“Work of God” (the Divine Office) in his life:

For me, the outstanding section of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is not the individual breakdown of the Office, but the teaching that nothing is to be preferred to the work of God (Chapter 43:3). This is the work of the monk—to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. If you go into the documents of Vatican II you read that the Liturgy of the Hours is the prayer of Christ. It is Christ who is praying through us today. Our Lord is praying through us today in Conyers. This is our principal work.

Our Constitution is the 21st century interpretation of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. The Constitution tells us that in no small way does the salvation of the world depend upon this praying of the Liturgy of the Hours (Sec. 19.1). If the salvation of the world depends on the praying of these Hours then we have to put them in the place of importance where they belong.

At the Divine Office is the prayer of Christ, and I share in it today. Those hinge hours of the Office—Lauds and Vespers—should be primary and outstanding in our life. It makes us who we are: monks. “Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (43:3).

The goal was that this type of passionate vision for prayer would be experienced

in the ten-week session. The group used the Upper Room Worship Book of the United

Methodist Church during the final five weeks. In the morning, group members used “A Liturgy for Morning Prayer” (Eslinger 112-13). In the evening, members chose between “A Liturgy for Evening Prayer” (114-16) and “A Liturgy for Night Prayer” (116-17).

Research Methods

In his book Research Methods in Education, William Wiersma writes, “The interview is an effective method of conducting a survey” (183). Concerning specifically the semi-structured interview, Tom Wengraf, in Qualitative Research Interviewing, writes that this type of interview contains (among others) the following qualities. First, it is conversational with face-to-face interaction (4). Secondly, it is particularly well prepared:

Semi-structured interviews are designed to have a number of interviewer questions prepared in advance but such prepared questions are designed to be sufficiently open that the subsequent questions of the interviewer cannot be planned in advance but must be improvised in a careful and theorized way. As regards such semi-structured interviews, they are ones where research and planning produce a session in which most of the informant’s responses can’t be predicted in advance and where you as interviewer therefore have to improvise probably half—and maybe 80% or more—of your responses to what they say in response to your initial prepared question or questions. (5)

Thirdly, the interview is in-depth. In other words, the interviewer seeks to “get a sense of how the apparently straight forward is actually more complicated, of how the surface appearance may be quite misleading about ‘depth realities’” (Wengraf 6-7). The interview questions were structured for the express purpose of seeking to answer all three research questions, with an emphasis on the third question. In summary, these questions sought to discover what changes occurred in the participants’ relationship with Christ, as well as their self-understanding, as a result of participating in this study. They also seek to discover which elements in the study were most effective in producing these

changes.

An inventory was used just before the interviews and given on an individual basis at the same time as the interviews. This instrument is known as the Spiritual Formation Inventory and is authored by Pastors Kevin Rogers and Tim Isbell of New Life (Nazarene) Church, Cupertino, California. It has been adapted both by deleting some statements and by adding others (see Appendix E). The inventory was structured for the express purpose of seeking to answer the first two research questions. In summary, these questions sought to discover what cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes occurred in the participants' relationships with Christ, self-understanding, and involvement in certain devotional practices as a result of participating in this study. The third question, which sought to discover the most effective elements in the study for producing these changes, was pursued through other methods, the primary one being the final interview.

The inventory, as adapted, focuses upon four particular areas of spiritual formation. The first is entitled, "My Relationship to God." Within this area are four sub areas: "The Lordship of Christ," "God's Word," "Prayer," and, "Faith." The other three primary areas of spiritual formation in the inventory are "My Relationship to Other Believers," "My Relationship to Non-Believers," and "Holiness."

Out of these building blocks a ten-week project was constructed as found in Appendixes B and C.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

In his book Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster writes, “Today there is an abysmal ignorance of the most simple and practical aspects of nearly all the classical spiritual disciplines” (3). Yet, one’s ability to experience the transforming power of Jesus Christ is directly related to one’s willingness to use the spiritual disciplines he has given. Foster continues, “God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us” (7).

A biblical approach to seeking a deeper relationship with Christ must include a genuine attempt to grow, both in regards to knowledge and experience, toward the spiritual disciplines.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a ten-session group study of the Song of Solomon on the participants’ relationships with Christ, their self-awareness, and their use of certain selected devotional practices in a self-selected, volunteer group of regular attendees of the Trinity United Methodist Church and First United Methodist Church of Interlachen.

In this third chapter, the design of the study, as well as its development, is demonstrated.

Research Questions

The purpose statement of this study recognized the essential relationship between the Christian’s devotional life and the depth of his or her relationship to Christ. The research questions, therefore, sought to determine the effect the ten-week study had on

the members' devotional lives. The first question focused upon the changes in the members' devotional practices that did or did not occur following the group experience. The second question sought to discover if the emphasis upon knowing Jesus as one's Bridegroom-King enabled the participants to grow in regard to their own self-understanding. The third and final question sought to determine which, if any, elements of the group experience genuinely assisted the participants in growing their devotional lives.

Research Question #1

What changes occurred in the participants' relationships with Christ as a result of participating in this study?

I sought to answer this question through the use of these data sources:

1. Spiritual Formation Inventories, especially through certain questions in the "Lordship of Christ" section,
2. Interviews, especially through question 1b in the pre-project interview and questions 2a and 2b in the post-project interview,
3. Journalistic assignments, especially those of weeks one and three, and
4. Field notes, especially for the weeks of 9 and 16 September.

Research Question #2

What changes occurred in the participants' self-understanding as a result of participating in the study?

During the ten weeks, the members of the study dealt with the theme of "shame" as it relates to the participants' self-images. The ten-week small group experience is founded upon the belief that true life change can and does happen in small groups. In their book Epiphany Manual, Muto and Kaam write of the value of a group setting:

Formation in a group setting, with texts from Scripture and the masters as centerpieces for reflection, brings people rather quickly from getting acquainted exchanges of information or mere problem solving to sharing on a much deeper level of faith formation. This shift occurs thanks to the methods and dynamics inherent in this art and discipline. (16)

Has the small group experience been a vehicle for change in their lives? If so, what were the changes?

I sought to answer this question through the use of these data sources:

1. Spiritual Formation Inventories, especially through certain questions in the “Holiness” and “Lordship of Christ” sections,
2. Inventories, especially through questions in 2b and 2e,
3. Journalistic assignments, especially those of weeks three and four, and
4. Field notes, especially those for the weeks of 16 and 23 September.

Research Question #3

What particular elements in the study were most effective in producing changes in the participants?

Significant changes in the participants’ relationships with Christ made imperative asking which of the above elements (see questions 1-2) of the ten-week experience were efficacious in producing them. The extent to which each element helped to produce that desired change must also be determined.

I sought to answer this question through the use of these data sources:

1. Spiritual Formation Inventories, especially through certain questions in the “God’s Word,” “Prayer,” and “Holiness” sections,
2. Interviews, especially through questions 2c and 2j,
3. Journalistic assignments, especially weeks five through nine, and

4. Field notes, especially the weeks of 30 September through 4 November.

Population and Sample

The population for this ten-week project consisted of twelve adults (18 years and older) who regularly attended (at least two Sundays per month) one of the worship services at Trinity United Methodist Church of Palatka, Florida, or First United Methodist Church of Interlachen, Florida. Adults were asked to volunteer for the project. They were told that they would need to plan to attend all ten of the weekly ninety-minute sessions (except for illness) and complete all assignments, including that of giving thirty to forty minutes of structured study and prayer for five out of seven days of each week. The group was limited to twelve participants (plus the leader) in order to enable the group to maintain excellent levels of intimacy and discussion as well as allow maximum opportunity for observing the dynamics of the group's maturation process. Each of the twelve was treated equally as regards to being asked all of the research questions and the weekly journaling question. Participants were requested to contribute twenty dollars in order to cover expenses. I took roll at each of the group meetings.

Methodology

This project was an evaluative study in the experimental mode, which utilized a pretest, field notes, a weekly journaling question, and a posttest design with no comparison group. The subjects were self-selected volunteers who were members of Trinity UMC and First UMC of Interlachen who committed to participating, when at all possible, in all ten sessions and to completing the given assignments.

Participants were given individual, pre-study interviews two to three weeks prior to the first session. These interviews served to establish what the devotional practices of

the members were before attending any of the sessions. During this interview I dealt with issues pertaining to Research Question #1. Along with each interview, participants were given the Spiritual Formation Inventory from the Cupertino Church of the Nazarene (see Appendix E). This inventory was both qualitative and quantitative while the subsequent interviews were only qualitative. Those taking the inventory were asked to respond to forty-seven statements by placing a 0, 1, 2, or 3 next to them.

I took field notes immediately following each of the ten sessions, commenting upon select members of the group. I especially sought to notice places of growth and by what means this growth was procured.

Group members were given journaling questions each week, which enabled them to reflect upon their reaction to that same week's subject matter.

Participants were given the Spiritual Formation Inventory and individual, poststudy interviews two weeks after the last session. These served to discover the changes that occurred in the members' devotional practices and in their relationships to God, others, and themselves as a result of knowing Jesus as their Bridegroom-King. The reason for waiting two weeks after the final session was to give the participants ample time to either continue or discontinue the devotional practices they learned in the study. Issues relating to each of the research questions were discussed in these interviews.

In order to evaluate the change in the participants' relationship with Christ, their devotional practices, weekly journals, and my field notes were used as evidence. By combining the above and gauging the changes in the pre- and posttest interviews and Spiritual Formation Inventory I sought to discover the most frequently mentioned common themes, thus producing an ethnographic analysis.

Variables

The independent variable of this research study was the ten-week small group experience. The level of validity for the independent variable was the review of the curriculum by the mentor and finally by the entire research committee. The three dependent variables this study measured are the group participants' affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses as a result of taking part in the ten-week small group study. The change in affect, cognition, and behavior were measured by the pre- and post-interviews as well as through field notes and the participants' responses to their weekly journaling question.

As the group consisted of only thirteen persons (including myself), I took responsibility for collecting and compiling the data.

Documentation

I designed the documentation used.

Field Notes

Notes were made concerning selective members as well as the group as a whole as I sought to answer the following questions. The questions I asked myself for the field notes were, "Did the individuals in the group actively listen?" "Did they appear to be developing a basic, cognitive knowledge of the session's concepts?" "Did they show signs of successfully applying the session's concepts to needs they were experiencing in their own lives?" "Did they ascribe to the session's primary concepts an increasing sense of worth and heightened appetite for them, pursuing, seeking out, and desiring to practice these behaviors?"

Journaling Question

Each journaling question had at least one of three goals, which were also found in

the field notes. The first was both to aid the participants in and to ascertain if individuals appeared to be developing a basic, cognitive knowledge of the session's concepts. The second was both to aid the participants in and to ascertain if individuals showed signs of successfully applying the session's concepts to needs experienced in their own lives. The third was both to aid the participants in and to ascertain if individuals were ascribing to the session's primary concepts an increasing sense of worth and heightened appetite for them, pursuing, seeking out, and desiring to practice these behaviors.

Data Collection

I collected data administering the Spiritual Formation Inventory. During the pre- and post-interviews, I took notes. I wrote the field notes immediately following each of the ten sessions. I collected the weekly (take-home) journaling question before each session began.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Results of individual interviews and answers to the weekly journaling question were kept completely confidential, known only to myself and the interviewee or journaler. As participants were asked to keep their own individual private journals, they were given a separate journaling notebook for their weekly question. I alone kept and read the field notes.

Participants were clearly told, through both the written and spoken word, of this confidentiality before the first session.

Interview, Field Note, and Journaling Question Administration

While the names of the members of the project group were finalized one month prior to the first session of the group, the pre-study interviews were conducted two to

three weeks before the first session. Interviews were conducted in my (pastoral) office to insure confidentiality.

Post-study interviews were conducted two weeks after the last session, also in my office for the same above reason.

As the purpose of the journaling question was to enable individual group members to reflect at home upon a particular aspect of a session's content, the questions were passed out in a written form at the end of each session. The answers to the question were then collected at the beginning of the following session.

I made field notes immediately following each group session. Notes were made concerning the group and, when needed, particular members as I sought to answer the field note questions.

Data Analysis

The primary statistical procedures employed in analyzing the data gathered in the semi-structured pre- and post-interviews were ethnographic analysis, which were used to discover recurring themes. Using ethnography, I looked for recurring themes by placing my research tools before me and recording these recurring themes on three by five index cards. I then sorted the themes, evaluating them by their frequency. I also used quotations from those cards to illustrate my findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Profile of Subjects

Twelve subjects comprised the group (not including myself). Nine were women, and three were men. Their ages ranged from those in their 40s to those in their 70s. Six members comprised three married couples. Nine members were from Trinity United Methodist Church, and three members were from First United Methodist Church of Interlachen. All were strongly committed, mature, evangelical Christians possessing a desire for a deeper walk with God.

I will seek to answer the three research questions by systematically analyzing the data from a comparison of the pre- and post-project Spiritual Formation Inventories, a comparison of the pre- and post-project, semi-structured interviews, the weekly (home) journalizing assignment, and the weekly field notes. (Both the inventories and interviews were given privately and individually. They were both given approximately two weeks prior to and two weeks after the project.)

Evaluating the Data as It Pertains to the First Research Question

The first research question asks, “What changes occurred in the participants’ relationships with Christ as a result of participating in this study? Have these ten weeks had a significant effect on the participants’ relationship with Christ? What were these changes, if any?”

The spiritual formation inventory. The Inventory asked users to grade themselves in various categories. Grading was done using a scale of zero to three. “Zero” would mean “not here.” “One” would mean “thinking about living here.” “Two” meant,

“learning to live here.” “Three” meant “living here or beyond.” Table 4.1 demonstrates the changes that took place between the pre-project and post-project interviews in regard to the members’ relationship with Christ.

Table 4.1. Changes in Participants’ Relationships with Christ (Spiritual Inventory)

Category	Pre-project	Post-project
Faith	2.72	2.81
Lordship of Christ	1.98	2.10
God’s Word	2.03	2.60
Prayer	2.25	2.63
Holiness	2.13	2.28

There was a noticeable change in all areas. The greatest change took place in the area of “God’s Word.” The extensive use of the *Lectio Divina*, which regularly directed members to the use of Scripture, likely caused this degree of change. Members were required to use the *Lectio* regularly for the first half of the ten-week project. Many members continued using the *Lectio* throughout the entire project. I found the smallest change in the area “Lordship of Christ.” The small size of this change may be due to the fact that all twelve members were already strongly committed to serving Jesus as Lord before they began the project; thus, their need was not to increase their commitment level but to learn how to develop a deeper and more varied devotional life.

The semi-structured interviews. In the pre-project interview, members were asked to share how “thinking of Jesus as your bridegroom might alter your concept of Him and how He relates to you.” Five of the twelve said they did not know. Two of the twelve related this concept only to the future marriage of the Church with Christ. Three reported that this concept enabled them to think of Jesus as their helper and friend. Only

two of the twelve said that this concept pointed them to an exciting, dynamic relationship. In the post-project interviews, members were asked, “How has relating to Jesus as your Bridegroom-King and yourself as His bride made a difference in your devotional life?” Nine of the twelve now claimed that experiencing Jesus as their bridegroom-king and themselves as his bride had enabled them to possess a deeper devotional life. A member wrote of this new experience:

I found a new way to unwrap the beautiful cover on the present of the true vision of [what] the Lord’s done for us. I was able to see the [Song of Solomon] as a parable like Jesus used so much. And by substituting GOD, Christ or Jesus for the groom when I read and the Church, Believers or myself for the bride, I began to see the present of love unfold from the verses.

The other three did not experience this transformation.

In the post-project interview, the members were asked, “What difference do you [now] see in your own heart?” Ten of the twelve stated that they could tell a definite difference. Nine of those ten said they were now experiencing a greater intimacy with Christ. The other one of the ten spoke of entering into a greater trust in their relationship with Christ. Here, one of the members wrote of this intimacy:

It [the step of contemplation] brought me closer to my Bridegroom because I am still and quiet. I enjoy being with my King singing praises to Him. Drinking Him in. Meditating on His greatness—His awesomeness. His love for me—my love for Him. There is peace in His presence and joy.

I also asked the members in the post-project interview, “How has your devotional life changed?” Eleven of the twelve noted a significant change. Five of the eleven stated that they were now giving their devotional life a higher priority, using more time and structure. Two of the eleven stated that their devotional life now possessed a greater variety of elements.

In the post-project interviews, I asked the members, “After two weeks, how is your [personal] spiritual formation plan going?” Ten members said their plans were going very well. One said it was going pretty well. One reported her plan was proceeding “ragged, but going.”

The weekly journalistic questions. I will refer only to those journalistic questions that relate to the appropriate research question.

After the first meeting, I asked members to read the Song of Solomon and record those qualities of the bridegroom-king (Solomon) that reminded them of Jesus. Eleven of the twelve were able to begin relating (though to differing degrees) the bridegroom-king to Jesus. One member wrote, “Jesus is delightful and pleasing. His banner over me is love. His right arm embraces me. Jesus is mine and I am His as the beloved was to the lover in the Song.”

Another weekly question asked the members to write a letter to Jesus regarding a personal experience of shame, asking him to enter and heal their personal, shame-caused wounds. Eleven of the twelve found this exercise beneficial. Eight members were able to identify areas in their lives where they had been shamed. Two other members recognized God’s preeminent grace, preventing shameful experiences. Overall, God’s love was manifested and experienced through this exercise. One member, writing of a present, difficult experience, wrote, “My Father has been in on it from the beginning, as well as Jesus my friend and the Comforter. [But] Jesus my bridegroom was never invited before, especially to enter the wounds.”

Another journalistic exercise asked the members to identify ways in which they might be committing sins of commission by throwing water on the fire of their

relationship with Christ and/or committing sins of omission thus reducing the fuel to the fire of their relationship with Christ. All of the twelve were able to personally identify some of the above sins in their own lives as well as propose ways to increase their fire. One member wrote of increasing her fire: "To increase my fire I will spend more time on my knees praying and listening for God to speak to me. I have a hard time hearing Him. I need to find a place that is comfortable and where I won't feel like I will be interrupted at any time." Another member wrote of how she could be withholding fuel: "I'm sure I withheld fuel by not doing all the appointed times with my Upper room Worship Book." Seven of the twelve were able to relate throwing water on their fire to particular sins of commission. Ten of the twelve related the withholding of fuel to particular lapses in their devotional lives.

A further journalistic assignment invited the members to listen for their Bridegroom-King's voice to "come away" and then respond to that voice. Here eleven of the twelve members thought they very probably heard his voice and responded. The other member misunderstood the assignment. Here, members exhibited a beautiful intimacy with Jesus. One member wrote of experiencing God's presence: "This has been the most fulfilling for I have felt the presence of the Lord for most of it. The Lord said, 'I want every minute of your time.'" Another member wrote of an experience of intercessory prayer:

The best time I had this week with my Lord is when I brought the people I wanted to pray for into His presence. First I visualized Jesus on the throne. I knelt at His feet and gloried in His presence. Then each person I wanted to pray for I brought before His throne. I didn't try to tell Jesus their problems or what I wanted Him to do for them. I just let them bask in His presence.

Still another member reported about how "coming away" led to praise:

When I hear God's voice to "Come away" I feel a need to pause, breath in, and listen to His voice. I then begin praising Him and thanking him for all He has done for me. As I am doing this I always end up singing (not meaning to). The words and songs just come to me.

The field notes. The following field notes record the wonderful intimacy with Jesus experienced regularly, through the fellowship of the twelve (plus the leader) during our ten weekly meetings together.

9 September: I began the evening, asking for input regarding their assignment to read from the Song of Songs 15 minutes per day. All but two were able to make the transition from the bridegroom-king, Solomon, to the Bridegroom-King, Jesus.

23 September: Finishing with Communion under a real banner of love was outstanding. We went forward in groups of three, with each taking turns in both serving and receiving the elements. As the two servers offered the elements to the other, they did so speaking a blessing over the one receiving. The group moved around, enabling the one receiving to stand literally under the banner of love I had placed in the room.

21 October: Our Bible study time was almost electrifying. There were a few who had significantly experienced those moments when the Bridegroom comes to us—at an inopportune time—seeking and pursuing us.

4 November: I'm not sure I have ever seen a greater night. As the members shared their Spiritual Formation Plans, it was clear eleven out of twelve members had chosen to incorporate significant elements of the project into their Plan. Each of the twelve members created excellent plans. A few shared as to how their lives had been genuinely changed, noting that God was taking them to deeper spiritual places than they'd ever known. The time at which members (one on each side) stood up and prayed

for the member who had just shared, was incredible. The prayers were full of love.

Clearly, this group had bonded at a very intimate level.

Evaluating the Data as It Pertains to the Second Research Question

The second research question asks, “What changes occurred in the participants’ self-understanding as a result of participating in the study?”

The spiritual formation inventory. The inventory asked users to grade themselves in various categories. Grading was done using a scale of zero to three. “Zero” would mean “not here.” “One” would mean “thinking about living here.” “Two” meant “learning to live here.” “Three” meant “living here or beyond.”

I have identified nine statements in the inventory that deal with the area of self-understanding. I have divided them into three categories. The first category concerns how well one views one’s self as the bride of Christ. Here, the average score changed from 1.56 (pre-project) to 2.11 (post-project). The second category sought to help the individual identify areas in the project member’s own life where he or she may have been shamed. This category also sought to identify the extent to which a project member may be experiencing God’s healing grace from having experienced that shame. The pre-project average score was 1.64. The post-project score was 2.08. The third category dealt with the member’s ability to identify areas where he or she may have shamed another person and is now seeking to bring healing to that person. The pre-project score was 2.04 and the post-project score was 2.40. Table 4.2 illustrates these scores and the changes from a pre-project perspective to a post-project perspective in the three categories. All indicators moved in a positive direction.

Table 4.2. Changes in Participants' Self-Understanding (Spiritual Inventory)

Category	Pre-project	Post-project
Ability to view one's self as the bride of Christ	1.56	2.11
Ability to identify shame in one's life and subsequently seek healing	1.64	2.08
Ability to identify areas where one has shamed another and is now seeking to bring that person healing	2.04	2.40

The semi-structured interviews. In the post-project interview, members were asked if relating to Jesus as their Bridegroom-King and themselves as his bride made a difference in the way they viewed themselves. Three saw no difference, two were unsure, and seven experienced a significant difference, which they described as now seeing themselves as more precious and desirable to Christ than previously.

Again, in the post-project interview, members were asked how relating to Jesus as their Bridegroom-King and themselves as his bride made a difference in the way they applied their self-understanding to shame, both past and present. In seven members this relationship did not affect the way in which they related to shame. Four other members were able to apply their self-understanding to shame in such a way that they experienced his love in a deep, intimate, manner. One member said that relating this relationship to shame helped him to trust God to be with him in any future experience of shame.

The weekly journalistic questions. Following the first group session, the members were asked to read the Song of Solomon and record those qualities of the Bridegroom-King that remind them of the bridegroom-king. While I had not originally intended that this question relate to the members' self-understanding, most of the members immediately began to see themselves as Christ's precious, desired, beloved bride. The following quotations, all from different members, illustrate this self-

understanding.

-“In the Song of Solomon the Bridegroom-king sees the girl as beautiful and perfect in every way. I think God is saying that I and others are beautiful.”

-“The bride has been rejected by her family and as such is an outcast. But all the Bridegroom sees and expects is our heart.”

-“There are many others but there is only one like His bride. Christ’s attention to His bride is exclusive. Christ desires His bride.”

-“God loves us even when we feel unlovable.”

-“With all my flaws you still love me. You let me come to Your chambers, Your Holy of Holies. You bring me to the banqueting house and Your banner over me is love.”

-“He, Jesus, being the Bridegroom-king, me being His beloved. He being the lover, He wants me closer.”

-“Jesus is mine and I am His as the beloved was to the lover in the Songs.”

-“Jesus desires her [His bride] over all others.”

-“Christ the Bridegroom loves His bride so much that He died for her.”

-“We can’t buy Jesus’ love—he gives it freely.”

-“Christ’s desire is for each of us.”

Another assignment asked the members to record how they think their Bridegroom-King might desire to use them in the healing of others. Eleven of the twelve were able to view themselves as his healing instruments. All eleven spoke of the healing of the emotions; two wrote specifically of physical healing. Five related their ministry of healing specifically to prayer. Six wrote that their previous life experiences were means

through which they could share Christ's love. Following are the testimonies of two of the members.

The bridegroom desires to use me in his time for healing. Healing should be an everyday natural experience. Only as I trust the Bridegroom and remove myself, that is, surrender to Him, forgetting peer fear, is this [to] be possible.

My Bridegroom-King is using me in the healing of others by letting me share with them the experiences I have lived [through] in my life; experiences that have made me stronger and helped me to grow in Christ.

The field notes. The following quote from the group meeting of 16 September is consistent with the overall group experience regarding the members' self-understanding:

Tonight, we looked at Song of Solomon 1:5-6. When the group began to see the bride as having been shamed, many began to identify with her. She became as one of them. At this moment, one person who had so far received no benefit from the Song remarked that seeing the bride as shamed, at last made the bride come alive.

Evaluating the Data as It Pertains to the Third Research Question

The third and final research question asks, "What particular elements in the study were most effective in producing changes in the participants?"

The spiritual formation inventory. The inventory asked users to grade themselves in various categories. Grading was done using a scale of zero to three. "Zero" would mean "not here." "One" would mean "thinking about living here." "Two" meant "learning to live here." "Three" meant "living here or beyond."

Table 4.3 demonstrates the effectiveness of certain elements of the project. The first column represents scores in the pre-project interview, and the second column represents scores in the post-project interview.

Table 4.3. Changes in Participants' Usage of Particular Elements (Spiritual Inventory)

Category	Pre-project	Post-project
Prayer	2.25	2.63
God's Word	2.03	2.60
The reading of Christian books, especially those written by the masters	1.67	2.06
The level one is engaged in having and using a personal spiritual formation plan	1.67	2.92

While members grew in each of the four areas, the greatest growth came in the area of having and using a personal spiritual formation plan. This high level of growth demonstrates how even very committed Christians often do not possess a personal plan for their own spiritual formation. The least amount of growth occurred in the areas of prayer and the reading of Christian books. The small amount of growth in prayer is, I believe, due to the members' already high pre-project level. The relatively small amount of growth in the area of reading likely reflects the small amount of time spent regarding reading Christian books during the project.

The semi-structured interviews. I asked members (in the post-project interview) to rate the extent to which each of the regular elements of the weekly gathering was helpful. They used a scale of 1 through 5: 1 being not at all helpful and 5 being extremely helpful. Members' scores were averaged together (see Table 4.4)

Table 4.4. Extent to Which Each Regular Element of Weekly Gathering Was Helpful (Post-Project Interview)

Element	Score
Opening discussion of at-home experiences with the <i>Lectio</i> and/or the Divine Office	4.66
Small groups	4.66
The leader's teaching time	4.58
Singing together the songs of the bride	4.50
Prayer of Bishop William J. Carey (We closed the evening with this prayer the first five weeks.)	4.00
Divine Office (We closed the evening with this prayer the last five weeks.)	3.83
Refreshments	3.42

Members were asked to rate the primary elements of the project's curriculum, as to how helpful they were, using the same 1-5 scale (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. Participants' Rating of Primary Elements of Project's Curriculum (Post-Project Interview)

Element	Score
Scenic overlook reading	4.42
Breath prayer	4.42
Readings from the masters (small groups)	4.25
Song of Solomon	4.08
<i>Lectio Divina</i>	4.00
Bridegroom-kings' healing of the bride from shame	3.92
Christian music CD	3.83
Divine Office	3.58

I asked members in the post-project interview to list those elements of their devotional lives they were using on close to a daily basis. A fraction indicates a member who is using only part of that devotional element (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6. Participants' Use of Elements on Close to Daily Basis Two Weeks after Project's End (Post-Project Interview)

Element	Number of Members Using Element
Breath prayer	8.0
Scenic overlook reading	8.0
<i>Lectio Divina</i>	7.5
Divine Office	4.0
	(two members used partially)
Reading of the Song of Solomon	2.0
Reading from the masters	2.0

I asked the members in the post-project interview as to what was for them the most helpful element of the entire project. The question was open-ended. I have summarized the answers (see Table 4.7)

Table 4.7. Participants' Listing of Most Helpful Element of Entire Project (Post-Project Interview)

Element	Number of Members Who Found Element Helpful
"Experiencing a higher personal commitment to Jesus and the devotional life"	3
"The fellowship; being with eleven others who loved Christ"	3
"Scenic overlook concept"	2
" <i>Lectio Divina</i> "	2
"Leader's teaching time"	2
"Song of Solomon"	1

I asked members in the post-project interview to share the extent to which their personal spiritual formation plan is being fulfilled. Ten said it was being fulfilled very well. One said, "Partly." Another reported, "Ragged, but going."

The weekly journalistic questions. After receiving the *Lectio Divina* during one of the early group sessions, I asked members to comment upon what was for them the

most meaningful step of the *Lectio*, eleven of the twelve members easily and gladly identified one or more of the steps. Members had clearly received, understood, and practiced the *Lectio*.

During a subsequent group session members were taught the basics of the breath prayer. For their journalistic assignment, they were invited to both create and use a breath prayer and report on their experience. The results were outstanding as all twelve members had clearly experienced increased intimacy with Jesus through using the breath prayer. One member wrote, “Since I started trying this, it pops up in my head even when I don’t stop and think, ‘Now what is my breath prayer?’ It is always with me. Great!” Another member reported, “My breath prayer is, ‘Daddy God, I love you. May my Bridegroom-king, Jesus Christ always live in me.’” Still another member wrote, “It [my breath prayer] helps in relaxing me as I am saying it. I also enjoy singing it. I can feel the Holy Spirit’s presence and I rejoice and praise Him.”

Another journalistic assignment asked the members to describe the Divine Office as they experienced it at home, morning and evening. Four members experienced the Divine Office positively. For the remainder of the members, doing it both morning and evening proved to be asking too much. Where as the *Lectio* had required only one time slot, the Divine Office now required two (though each was shorter than the *Lectio*’s). Three of the members also found liturgy to be rote and dull.

The field notes. The following field notes from three different sessions illustrate the group’s high level of acceptance of the curriculum’s devotional skills.

9 September: I spent time explaining the “Scenic Overlook” concept of reading. It was received well and all three of the small groups benefited. Whereas last week 2 of

the 3 groups were done before the allotted 15 minutes, this week all three groups were still going strong at the 15 minute mark and probably could have continued another 15 minutes!

16 September: Once again, the small groups did well. They were able to dig deep. The “Scenic Overlook” concept is successful.

30 September: As I put these ten weeks together, I wondered to what extent this concept of the breath prayer would be helpful. Tonight, I was gloriously surprised. As we discussed it in the Bible Study segment, many seemed to instantly understand and affirm it. There were a few very good questions. As best as I could tell, no one felt left out or disconnected tonight.

Summary and Conclusions

Following are summaries and conclusions regarding the three research questions.

Conclusions as Regards the First Research Question

The first research question asks, “What changes occurred in the participants’ relationship with Christ as a result of participating in this study? Have these ten weeks had a significant effect on the participants’ relationship with Christ? What were these changes, if any?”

By comparing the pre- and post-Spiritual Formation Inventories, the members’ relationships with Christ grew in many areas. These areas include the lordship of Christ, faith, and holiness.

A comparison of the pre- and post-interviews clearly indicates that virtually all of the members now relate to Christ as their Bridegroom-King whereas before beginning this project they did not. Nine of the twelve members reported that this new

understanding of Christ has enabled them to deepen their devotional life.

The journalistic assignments give ample evidence of an increased intimacy with Jesus brought about by knowing Jesus as their Bridegroom-King and experiencing a deeper devotional life.

The field notes demonstrated that the above-mentioned transformation was evident in the weekly meetings.

Conclusions as Regards the Second Research Question

The second research question asks, “What changes occurred in the participants’ self-understanding as a result of participating in the study?”

A comparison of the pre- and post-Spiritual Formation Inventories demonstrated that by partaking of the project, the members are better able to view themselves as the precious, desired bride of Christ, grew in their ability to identify shame and receive God’s healing for that shame, and were also better enabled to identify where they may have shamed another and then seek to bring appropriate healing.

A comparison of the pre- and post-interviews argues for less growth in the area of self-understanding than do the inventories. Only about half the group appears to have experienced any level of transformation due to the newly understood Bridegroom-bridal relationship. One of them who experienced this transformation wrote the following:

Dear Lord, You are my Bridegroom and I am your Bride. I listen for Your voice. Oh, that I may hear You. I long to spend time alone with You. I find fullness of joy with You. My desire is to be in Your presence. I love You Lord.

The weekly journalistic assignments gave much evidence that virtually the entire group had begun to view themselves as more greatly desired, loved, and prized as the beloved bride of their Bridegroom-King. The assignments also showed that each of the

twelve viewed themselves as healing instruments of the Bridegroom-King.

The field notes, while not presenting a great deal of evidence, did point to virtually all of the members acquiring a genuine identification with the bride of the Song of Songs.

Conclusions as Regards the Third Research Question

The third and final research question asks, “What particular elements in the study were most effective in producing changes in the participants?”

A comparison of the Spiritual Formation Inventories demonstrated that the members grew in the disciplines of prayer, reading God’s Word, reading Christian (classic) books, and developing a spiritual formation plan.

Comparing the pre- and post-project interviews gave more than ample evidence of a true upgrade in the devotional lives in eleven of the twelve members. Each of the twelve members finished the project possessing a personal spiritual formation plan.

The journalistic assignments revealed a high level of acceptance of most of the new devotional skills by virtually all of the twelve.

The field notes pointed to a group of twelve continually experiencing the joy of a greater devotion to Christ made possible by discovering and experiencing new devotional skills and a new understanding of Jesus as their Bridegroom-King and themselves as his beloved bride.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Concerning the first research question, the greatest change I noted was that most of the members experienced a new, deeper level of intimacy with Christ. This deeper level of intimacy was created through a number of means, the greatest of which was the understanding of and experiencing of Jesus as one's Bridegroom-King. The Song of Solomon strongly points to the priority of "being" over "doing" as seen in Chapter 2. As members began to understand that the Bridegroom-King was more desirous of a deep relationship with them than merely service for him, many began to reorient their lives accordingly. The second reason for this increased level of intimacy was both the quantitative and qualitative growth in virtually all the members' devotional lives.

The implications are clear. The church must remember that which she has forgotten. As Charles R. Swindoll writes in his book, The Bride, "After spending more than thirty years in the pastorate, I've come to a startling conclusion. We the Church have almost forgotten who we are—the Bride of Christ" (10). Based upon the findings in Chapter 4 of this project, I would heartily agree with Swindoll. Nevertheless, while intellectually and experientially forgetting such a truth is a great tragedy, an equally great victory occurs when the Church remembers it.

The nation of Judah experienced such a tragedy and such a victory. Almost three thousand years ago, what was called "the book of the law" (probably the book of Deuteronomy) had been placed in their temple. Apparently, the priests so neglected this book that the nation completely forgot it. Then Josiah became king. Soon he decided to renovate the temple and once again make it fit for worship. During this renovation a

priest named Hilkiah discovered this book. Josiah then brought it before the people and their leaders. The result was a transformed nation. (2 Chron. 34:1-33)

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Corney was quoted as saying that for much of Christian history the Song of Songs has been an immensely popular text and that earlier, in the middle ages, Christians interpreted no other Old Testament book as often as they did the Song of Songs (497). In Chapter 2, Kallas was quoted as saying that between the time of Jerome and Ambrose and the eleventh century, more Latin commentaries were written on the Song of Songs than on the books of Galatians, Romans, Mark, or John (323). In Chapter 2 the reader also witnessed numerous giants of the faith offering their own personal testimonies as to the great value not only of knowing this book but of understanding this book as relating to Jesus and the Church.

Somehow, the Church has hidden a great book of God away, as did the nation of Judah. The leaders of the body of Christ must open this book, read it, experience transformation through it, and then bring it out to the people, returning the Church to its heritage: its present and promised future as the bride of Christ.

Her leaders must do even more, for not only has the Song of Songs been almost forgotten, but, at least within evangelical Protestantism, so have many of the bride of Christ's deep devotional wells. These are wells that since the fourth century (and probably before) have nourished and grown this bride, yet today these wells are treated as either irrelevant or nonexistent. In Chapter 2 the reader became aware of these devotional wells and learned that many of the Church's spiritual giants (masters) drank from these wells. In Chapter 1, the call came from other spiritual giants to return to these tried and true wells. The leaders of Christ's Church must return his bride to her wells.

Regarding the second research question, the most notable experience which occurred within the members was that most were able to begin viewing themselves as the bride of the bridegroom-king. As I spoke of the magnificent healing the bridegroom-king brought to his brides members were able to transfer this precious love to themselves. Many viewed themselves more and more through the eyes of the bridegroom-king, seeing themselves as desirable to him.

The first and most important step in this transformation is, as found in Chapter 2, the recognition that the Song of Solomon can be understood typologically. Such an understanding enables the individual to see him or herself as Christ's beloved bride. Unfortunately, not every member experienced this new vision. Perhaps more readings in our small groups which deal with the Song of Songs especially those which emphasize the bride's experience could further facilitate this.

Concerning the third research question, a most notable change occurred in eleven of the twelve members. Their devotional lives grew, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The elements of the curriculum which the members best accepted were the breath prayer, *Lectio*, and scenic overlook reading. Amazingly, all the elements proved helpful to at least some members.

Interestingly, the Divine Office was more preferred by the older members of the group while the younger members preferred the *Lectio*. I would expect this because the Divine Office is the more liturgical of the two.

All my pastoral life I have sought to impact Christians' devotional lives. My sermons have largely proved ineffective. Yet, here in a small-group practicum setting I saw fruit. Life change really does happen in small groups.

During the ten-week project, twelve hungry and thirsty Christians became intellectually and experientially acquainted with their identity as the bride of Christ and with her ancient wells. Many of them discovered, through the Song of Solomon, the present, magnificent reality of this new, yet old, identity. Virtually all of them also found the water from these wells absolutely delicious, faithful, and satisfying. They were not disappointed.

In chapter four of John's Gospel, a Samaritan woman tells the people of her city about the living water that she has found through Jesus the Messiah. The people believe in Christ and receive the living water. Soon after, in verse 42, these same people make a most wonderful statement: "And they were saying to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.'" This type of personal discovery and ownership was the experience of the great majority of the group members. Two weeks after finishing the project, virtually all were still actively and successfully pursuing their individual personal spiritual formation project. Thus, they were not drinking from these wells because of what I was saying and assigning during the project. Rather, they had tasted and drank for themselves, and now they had chosen these wells for themselves.

Limitations and Weaknesses of the Study

The study climaxed with the final session where group members shared their own personal spiritual formation plan, which they had created as fulfillment of their final home journalistic assignment. Hearing eleven out of twelve members choose many of the curriculum's devotional skills for their own was truly glorious. The other member chose to share and commit to the excellent devotional plan in which she previously engaged.

After each member shared his or her plan, the member on either side stood and came behind the sharing member's chair. Placing their hands on his or her head, they prayed that God would anoint him or her with the Holy Spirit in order to carry out their spiritual formation plan. The evening, scheduled to go two hours, went three.

Nonetheless, something was missing. About two weeks before the end of the project, I realized this and wrote of the following concern regarding the need for future accountability in my field notes of 21 October:

As we quickly near an end to our ten weeks, I am finding myself more and more concerned that without some kind of regular, ongoing accountability, the gains made these ten weeks will eventually decline. What kind of tool could I have built in to these weeks that would have encouraged and enabled them to in some way be accountable to each other after the ten weeks? This is, I believe a very significant question.

John Wesley understood this need for accountability. In his "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies (1743)," he wrote of the need for Christians to "watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation." Watching over one another in love would become one of the marks for which they would be recognized. Mr. Wesley understood that uniting together was not an option if the people were to continue to grow and not fall back. He writes of this spiritual necessity in his "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists." Here he is writing of the Societies. In a few months, the far greater part of those who had begun to "fear God, and work righteousness," but were not united together, grew faint in their minds, and fell back into what they were before. Meanwhile the far greater part of those who were thus united together continued "striving to enter in at the strait gate," and to "lay hold on eternal life."

The group experienced some accountability as they shared at-home experiences with each other. At the last session, members laid hands on one another and prayed for one another.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that was enough if those members are to continue to watch over one another in love. Just as I explicitly taught the Bridegroom-King-bridal relationship, and as the great devotional skills were explicitly communicated and experienced, I should have taught the concept and practice of accountability.

Omitting the concept of accountability represents a significant weakness and limitation of this project. While the members created outstanding personal spiritual formation plans, they were given no assistance from a brother or sister in Christ to live them. No one was there who would hold them accountable, watching over them in love, assisting them in working out their own salvation.

That there were only twelve members (plus the leader) represents another weakness. This prevented me from drawing any accurate generalizations from the data.

The project group was entirely Caucasian in makeup thus limiting the project in two ways. First, it denied the group the rich blessings that could have come from a diversely racial group. Second, by having a totally Caucasian group, I was unable to know how members of different ethnic groups would have responded to the project.

The entire project group consisted of highly committed, mature Christians. While having only highly committed Christians made for wonderful fellowship and learning, it also limited my ability to know how a young and/or partially committed Christian would have reacted to the project.

The final weakness, of which I am aware, is that the project did not enable the majority of group members to relate their own personal shame to their shame-healing bridegroom-king. I regret that the curriculum did not provide me any feedback from this important area during the project. Such feedback may have enabled me to make appropriate adjustments and present a more accurate and relevant understanding of shame theory and how it relates to the members' self-understanding as the bride of Christ.

During the post-project interviews, I asked each member to share any specific ways they knew to improve the project for the next group who would be experiencing it. I was amazed that no significant recommendations came forth. Only a few minor suggestions were shared. Clearly, the entire group was very satisfied with the experience.

Unexpected Findings

The first unexpected finding was the inability of seven of the twelve members to relate the shame of Solomon's bride to a time when they also personally experienced shame.

The second unexpected finding was that eleven of the twelve members absolutely received, embraced, and loved the new devotional skills. I had expected resistance in two places. First I had expected a fair number to balk at concepts that were at least 1,700 years old; however, they accepted them from the start. Ever since I began in the ministry, I have believed that if I could help people grow in their devotional lives I would certainly be helping them grow closer to Christ. Therefore, I have preached and preached on the devotional life for years. I have preached for years and seen very little fruit. As best as I can tell, my preaching has changed the devotional lives of relatively few people. Now,

for the first time, I have a tool that works; I can see the fruit. The fruit is so very, very evident.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 37:4-5, “Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it.” The Lord has given me the desire of my heart throughout this project. All throughout my pastorates I have longed for a means through which God would be pleased to transform hearts by transforming devotional lives. Now, through this project, God has fulfilled this desire in and through me. Once again, his grace has snuck up on me and caught me unaware. The glory all goes to him. I pray that much more fruit will come in the future years.

Recommendations for Further Study

I would encourage a study of the question, “How does a leader take a group of active, committed, busy Christians, which has covenanted to meet a given, limited number of times, into a further commitment of mutual accountability?”

A partial answer would be to add an eleventh week to the project dealing with the issue of accountability. This week would examine both accountability from a Wesleyan perspective and the doctrine and practice of the priesthood of all believers that Martin Luther revived. Members would then be given an opportunity to join a type of accountability group where they would share with others their progress regarding their personal spiritual formation plan.

I would also recommend that a serving opportunity be incorporated into the curriculum. One possibility might be to use group members in the healing ministry, which takes place monthly during Communion.

I will also recommend a change in the curriculum regarding shame theory. As I previously stated, the inability of many in the group to relate their personal shame to their self-understanding as the bride of Christ surprised me. After considerable reflection I believe I understand why. The concept of shame is personally very significant for me. When a professor a few years ago explained the difference between shame and guilt to my class, lights and bells went off within me. Seeing the bride's shame and subsequent healing by the bridegroom-king enabled my heart to open to Song of Solomon. There are many places in my personal history where I have experienced painful, toxic, shame. Thus I easily and immediately identified myself with the bride and identified her brothers with a few people and experiences I would like to forget.

Nonetheless, encountering toxic shame was my experience and not everyone else's. My error, then, was assuming that most other Christians had experienced the same type of horrible shame as I had. I now realize they have not and, therefore, cannot with integrity relate the bride's shame to theirs because they do not possess any traumatic memories of being shamed. One of the members even remarked that trying to relate the bride's shame to her own (which did not exist) gave her reason to praise God, for his wonderful grace had either so already healed her that she could not remember being shamed or had shielded her from experiencing the shame in the first place.

Clearly, then, I wrongly assumed that virtually everyone else has experienced shame in the same traumatic degree as I had. My recommendation is that I present shame theory in such a way as to define it as possessing more and various degrees and types. I discovered this insight when, a few weeks after the project, I preached about not being ashamed of Christ. After the sermon, one of the group members who had not been able to

relate shame theory to her own life came up to me saying that through that sermon she now understood the place of shame in her life.

I will also recommend that leaders and teachers also look for means different from those found in this project to enable the Church to recover a typological understanding and experience of the Song of Solomon. One excellent resource that approaches the Song of Songs typologically is “The Ravished Heart of God,” a two-volume workbook containing an in-depth, verse-by-verse study of the Song of Songs by Mick Bickle.

Finally, I recommend that leaders and teachers genuinely seek to know why the Church so easily and often ignores its image and identity as the bride of Christ. I will posit two possibilities. First, though Christian women have learned to refer to God as “Father,” Christian men often struggle with seeing themselves as a bride. Secondly, much of culture teaches that worth, value, and success come by doing. For the Christian to view him or herself as the bride of Christ is to define one’s greatest “accomplishment” as the pursuit of a relationship with Christ. By placing “being” ahead of “doing,” the doctrine and experience of the Church as Christ’s bride thus invades and challenges the depths of value systems.

Summary

Clearly an increased level of intimacy was experienced both individually and corporately, as was a betterment of the members’ devotional life both qualitatively and quantitatively, many also claimed a new, experimental understanding of Jesus as their Bridegroom-King. (All twelve members began the project already possessing a deep hunger for God and already experiencing some type of devotional life.) The great

majority of members experienced significant growth in their relationship with Christ as a result of the project. These changes are best understood as being a deeper devotional life and a more intimate relationship with Jesus whom they now know as their Bridegroom-King.

A significant transformation on the part of many of the new members appears to have occurred for they now see themselves as the beloved, precious, desired bride of Christ. Nevertheless, fewer members claimed to experience this change in the interviews. Many in the group were able to appropriate and experience the Bridegroom-King's healing and transforming love for the shamed bride. Only a few members were able to relate the bride's shame to their own. Virtually all members were able to view themselves as those called to be the Bridegroom-King's healers.

That the group understood and received the basic concepts of the curriculum's devotional elements is evident. Eleven of the twelve members experienced a genuine upgrade in their devotional lives. Those devotional elements of the project that were most effective in transforming the members' devotional lives were the breath prayer, scenic overlook reading, and the *Lectio Divina*. Those elements of the group meetings that members deemed most helpful were the leader's teaching time, small group time, and the discussions regarding the members' home experiences of the *Lectio* and/or Divine Office. Members also grew in the areas of prayer and relating to God's Word.

In her modern classic Hind's Feet on High Places, Hannah Hurnand writes about intimacy with God:

The Song of Songs expresses the desire implanted in every human heart, to be reunited with God himself, and to know perfect and unbroken union with him. He has made us for himself, and our hearts can never know rest and perfect satisfaction until they find it in him. (11)

During a period of ten weeks, twelve hungry and thirsty Christians came together.

Already pursued by their Bridegroom-King, they pursued him. Each one of them came a little bit closer to that perfect and unbroken union that will one day be theirs at the marriage supper of the Lamb. To God be the glory for he is truly doing great things.

APPENDIX A

Educational Goals for Ten-Week Project

Cognitive Goals

Based upon Taxonomy of Educational Objectives Handbook I: Cognitive Domain (Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krawthwohl)

1. Class members develop a basic, cognitive knowledge of the following concepts. This knowledge includes knowledge of terminology (63) and methodology (73).
 - Knowing Jesus as one's Bridegroom-King through the Song of Solomon
 - Knowing one's self as the (being healed) bride of the Bridegroom-King
 - Practicing the *Lectio Divina*
 - Practicing the breath prayer
 - Practicing the Daily Office
 - Engaging the masters
2. Members are able to translate the above in such a way as to describe them accurately in their own words, understand their major ideas as well as the way they relate to each other, and begin to make inferences regarding the implications, consequences, and causes and effects of practicing the above (92, 93, 90).
3. Members begin successfully applying the above concepts to needs, that they are experiencing in their own lives (120).

Affective Goals

Based upon the book by David Krawthwohl, Benjamin S. Bloom, and Bertram B. Masia Bloom, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives Handbook II: Affective Domain

1. During the class, members ascribe to the above values (see #1) an increasing sense of worth and a heightened appetite for them. Members will pursue, seek out, and desire to practice these behaviors (140-41, 145).
2. Upon completion of the class, members will take responsibility for continuing in some of the behaviors listed under #1 (145).

Behavioral Goals

1. Members will exit the group with a specific plan for continued spiritual growth.
2. As they listen to their CD, members use more and more Christian music as a daily means of pursuing and being pursued by their Bridegroom-King.

APPENDIX B

Topics for (Weekly) Curriculum

1. Beginning to know Jesus as our Bridegroom-King
2. *Lectio Divina* face-to-face: Into the Bridegroom-King's chambers
3. The shaming of the bride
4. The healing of the bride
5. The breath prayer: Walking alongside him
6. The Daily Office: Beginning and ending each day with him
7. Pursuing the Bridegroom-King
8. When the Bridegroom-King calls
9. Pt. 1: The Bridegroom's request: "Place me as a seal over your heart."
10. Pt. 2: The Bridegroom's request: "Place me as a seal over your heart."

WEEK ONE

Beginning to Know Jesus as Our Bridegroom-King

1. Share about a time in your life when the love of God was especially real to you.
2. Read and reflect upon John Bunyan's Conversion (Small groups)

In The Life of John Bunyan, we read of Bunyan speaking of his conversion. John Bunyan is the author of Pilgrim's Progress:

When the comforting time came, I heard one preach on these words in Solomon's Song, "Behold, you are fair, my love; behold, you are fair" (4:1). But at that time, he made these two words, "my love," his chief subject matter. He drew these conclusions, 1. That the Church and so every saved soul is Christ's love, when loveless. 2. Christ's love for us is not in any way caused by us. 3. Christ's love has been despised by the world. 4. Christ's love when under temptation and under destruction. 5. Christ's love from first to last.

When he came to the fourth statement, he said, "If it be true that the saved soul is Christ's love when under temptation and destruction; then poor tempted soul, when you are assaulted and afflicted with temptations, and the hidings of God's face, in spite of these things, think on those two words, 'my love' still."

So as I was going home, these words came again into my mind; and I fully remember as they came in, I said in my heart,—"What benefit shall I receive by thinking these two words?" This thought had no sooner passed through my heart, that these words began to kindle in my spirit,—"You are my love, you are my love," twenty times together. As they ran in my mind they grew stronger and warmer, and began to make me look up.

Then I began to surrender to the word, which powerfully, over and over made this joyful sound within my soul,—"You are My love. You are My love; and nothing shall separate you from My love." With that, my heart was full of comfort, and now I could believe that my sins would be forgiven me. Truly, I was now so taken with the love of God, that I could not tell how to contain myself until I got home. I thought I could have spoken of His love, and have told of his mercy to me, even to the very crows that sat on the plowed lands before me. (32-33)

3. Discussion Questions (Small groups)
 - a. What do you feel was the greatest barrier to Bunyan's conversion?
 - b. How did the Holy Spirit use the words in the Song of Solomon to bring about his conversion?

4. Refreshments

5. Bible study: Tracing the theme of God/Christ as the divine Bridegroom and Israel/Church as his bride through the Old and New Testaments

6. The Song of Solomon's place in Church history and the mind and heart of John and Charles Wesley

7. The Song of Solomon's place in us

a. My testimony: The song in my life

b. Passing out the CD with devotional songs I have written, including some from the Song of Solomon

8. Assignment

a. Spend 15 minutes a day reading the Song of Songs, reading at most two chapters per day

b. Journaling question: As you read the Song, what qualities of the bridegroom-king remind you of Jesus?

c. Listen to your CD when possible

9. Closing Prayer (see Appendix I)

WEEK TWO

***Lectio Divina* Face-to-Face: Into the Bridegroom-King's Chambers**

1. The “scenic overlook” concept of reading (see Appendix H)
2. A thought: Cars cost money, time, and aggravation! Yet, we continue to possess and use them. Why do we continually make this choice? Why don't we just walk?
3. Read and reflect regarding St. Therese's search for an elevator in her book, The Story of a Soul. (Small groups)

We are now living in the age of inventions, and we no longer have to take the trouble of climbing stairs, for, in the homes of the rich, an elevator has replaced these very successfully. I wanted to find an elevator, which would raise me to Jesus, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection.

I searched, then, in the Scriptures for some sign of this elevator, the object of my desires, and I read these words coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: “Whoever is a LITTLE ONE let him come to me.” And so I succeeded. I felt I had found what I was looking for. But wanting to know, O God, what You would do to the very little one who answered Your call, I continued my search and this is what I discovered: “As one whom a mother caresses, so will I comfort you; shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you.” Ah! Never did the words more tender and more melodious come to give joy to my soul. The elevator that must raise me to heaven is Your arms, O Jesus! And for this I had no need to grow up, but rather I had to remain little and become this more and more. (207-08)

4. Discussion Questions (Small groups)
 - a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
 - b. Where is your “scenic overlook”? Please describe it.
 - c. When Therese says she desired an elevator, what did she mean?
 - d. Was she wrong to desire this?
 - e. Had she not found her “elevator,” what would have been the result?
5. Refreshments
6. Bible study: Relating face-to-face with our Bridegroom-King: A brief study of Song of Songs 1:4; Psalms 27:4-8; Luke 10:38-42; 2 Corinthians 3:18
7. Today, a method of relating in a face-to-face manner with our Bridegroom-King within his chambers: The *Lectio Divina*

- a. A brief history of the *Lectio Divina* as a classical discipline
- b. Pass out and explain my version of the *Lectio Divina*
- c. Do it together, step-by-step

8. Assignment: *Lectio Divina*, five days/week, for next four weeks

9. Journaling Question: Where, specifically are you experiencing God's presence in the *Lectio Divina*?

10. Closing Prayer (see Appendix I)

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WEEK 3**The Shaming of the Bride**

1. A thought: Remember a time you were blamed for something that wasn't your fault. What did it feel like?
2. Read and reflect upon Charles Spurgeon's description of the cross: (Small groups)

When you study deeply the death of your Lord, unless your heart is like an adamant stone, you must be bowed down with grief. The visage of him who was heaven's glory was more marred than that of any man, and his form more than the sons of men.

He, whose brow was from the beginning surrounded with majesty, had his forehead and temples torn with a coronet of thorns. Those blessed cheeks that are as beds of spices were distained with spittle from the lips of menials. His face, which is the joy of heaven, was buffeted and bruised by mockers. His blessed shoulders, which uphold the world, they scourged with knotted whips until the blood ran down in crimson rivers as the ploughers made deep furrows. How could they flout him so? Was it possible that my Beloved should be scorned and slandered, spit upon and condemned as a felon?

Did they lay the shameful cross upon his blessed back, and lead him through the streets amid the ribald mob? He who knew no sin was numbered with the transgressors. Found guilty of nothing save excess of love to man, he was led away to be crucified. They hurried him off to die at the common place of the gibbet.

The rough soldiers nailed him to the cross, and lifted up the rough tree for all to gaze thereon. I wonder the angels bore it. It seems extraordinary that they should look on while men were taking their Lord and Master, and driving bolts through his hands and feet, and lifting his sacred body upon the cruel tree. But they did bear it; and the Christ hung on the tree of doom in a burning heat, through the fierce sun, and the inflammation of his wounds, and inward fever. He was so parched that his tongue was dried up like a potsherd, and was made to cleave to the roof of his mouth. There he hung amid derision, his bones all dislocated, and his very flesh dissolved with faintness as though it were turning back to its native dust. Meanwhile his soul was "exceeding sorrowful, even unto death"; and the Father's face which has sustained thousands of martyrs was turned away from him until he cried, "Lame sabachthani."

3. Discussion Questions (Small groups)

- a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
- b. Where is your "scenic overlook"? Please describe it.
- c. Spurgeon calls the cross of Christ "shameful." Why?

d. How does the Holy Spirit change us as we embrace the shameful cross?

4. How is your *Lectio*?

5. Singing the songs of the bride

6. Refreshments

7. A brief examination of shame theory:

a. The destructive force of toxic shame

b. How shame differs from guilt

8. Bible study:

a. The shaming of the bride: Song of Songs 1:5-6

b. The bride's potential shame (1:5-6) contrasted to 1:1-4.

c. What happened? The real knowledge and love of the Bridegroom-King is the solution to our shame.

9. My story: My mother's illness; counselor's means of helping me to hug, love, and feel compassion for the 17-year-old who was (now at 24) shaming himself for (then) not better caring for his mother.

10. Steve Seamands' chapter "A Great Big Drop of Blood" in Wounds That Heal

11. Assignment

a. Continue daily with the *Lectio*

b. Journaling question: Reflect upon 1:5-6. Compose, from your heart, a letter to your Bridegroom-King. Share with him the times you remember experiencing shame from your childhood until now. In your letter, invite him to enter into your wounds. (*You need not turn this answer in to me.*)

c. Was the above exercise helpful to you? How?

12. Closing Prayer (see Appendix I)

WEEK 4
The Healing of the Bride

1. How is your *Lectio*?
2. A thought: Think about a time when you were emotionally hurt and someone cared enough to love you through the hurt, bringing you to healing.
3. Read and reflect upon John of the Cross's young shepherd (Small groups)

A lone young shepherd lived in pain
 withdrawn from pleasure and contentment,
 his thoughts fixed on a shepherd-girl
his heart an open wound with love.

He weeps, but not from the wound of love,
 there is no pain in such affliction,
 even though the heart is pierced;
 he weeps in knowing he's been forgotten.

That one thought:
 his shining one has forgotten him, is such great pain
 that he bows to brutal handling in a foreign land,
his heart an open wound with love.

The shepherd says:
 I pity the one who draws herself back from my love,
 and does not seek the joy of my presence
 though *my heart an open wound with love for her.*

After a long time he climbed a tree,
 and spread out his shining arms,
 and hung by them and died,
his heart an open wound with love. (83)

4. Discussion Questions (Small groups)
 - a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
 - b. Where is your "scenic overlook"? Please describe it.
 - c. Describe the shepherd's heart. Why was it broken?
 - d. Why did he so desire the shepherd-girl for himself?

e. How is the shepherd's heart like Jesus'?

5. Singing the songs of the bride

6. Refreshments

7. Using these declarations of this once-shamed bride, describe her self-image.

a. "I am black but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem" (1:5)

b. "I am the rose of Sharon, The lily of the valleys." (2:1)

c. "My beloved is mine, and I am his." (2:16)

d. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." (6:3)

e. "I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me." (7:10)

8. Using these passages in the Song, trace how her bridegroom-king enables her to move from shame to song.

a. Public, unashamed showing of his love for her (2:4)

b. Longsuffering and patience (2:7; 3:5)

c. Healing of memories (3:4)

d. Through the eyes of his love; gifts of the Spirit (4:12-16)

e. Revealing the truth to her regarding her mother's love (6:9)

f. She has become a place of peace for Solomon (8:10b)

g. Fully healed: fruitfulness in the location of her shaming (8:11-12)

h. Stewardship as a means of gratitude for her healing (8:11-12)

i. Treating the workers righteously (as she would have like to have been treated) (8:11-12)

9. Communion under his banner of love

10. Assignment:

a. Journaling Question: How is your Bridegroom-King desiring to use you in the healing of others?

b. Continue *Lectio*

11. Closing prayer (see appendix I)

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WEEK 5**The Breath Prayer****Walking alongside Him**

1. How is your *Lectio*?
2. A thought: Where in your past has God called you to a new challenge that was clearly out of your comfort zone?
3. Read and reflect upon the danger to our salvation about which François Fénelon speaks: (Small groups)

How dangerous it is for our salvation, how unworthy of God and of ourselves, how pernicious even for the peace of our hearts, to want always to stay where we are! Our whole life was only given us to advance us by great strides toward our heavenly country. The world escapes like a delusive shadow. Eternity already advances to rescue us. Why do we delay to advance while the light of the Father of mercies shines for us? Let us hasten to reach the kingdom of God.

Those who fear to see too clearly what this love asks, fool themselves by thinking that they have this watchful and devoted love. There is only one way to love God: to take not a single step without him, and to follow with a brave heart wherever he leads.

All those who live the Christian life, and yet would very much like to keep a little in with the world, run great risk of being among the lukewarm of whom it is said they will be “spewed out of the mouth of God.”

God has little patience with those weak souls who say to themselves, “I shall go this far and no farther.” Is it up to the creature to make the law for his Creator? What would a king say of a subject, or a master of a servant, who only served him in his own way, who feared to care too much for his interests, and who was embarrassed in public because of belonging to him? What will the King of Kings say to us if we act like these cowardly servants? (67-68)

4. Discussion Questions (Small groups)
 - a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
 - b. Where is your “scenic overlook”? Please describe it.
 - c. What, according to Fenelon, is to follow God with a “brave heart”?
 - d. In the last few weeks, where in your walk with Christ is God calling you to so follow him?

5. Singing the songs of the bride

6. Refreshments

7. The story of The Way of a Pilgrim and the Pilgrim Continues His Way (French)

a. The pilgrim's dissatisfaction

b. His search

c. Finding a spiritual director

d. His director's advice—How to begin with a breath prayer

8. John Cassian's advice

9. My Story: Going for walks with my breath prayer (Just as a song can almost unconsciously stay with you, why not so with prayer?)

10. "Side-by-side" (Song of Solomon 1:4) prayer, wherein the bridegroom and bride "run together" and still have constant fellowship.

11. Sample Breath Prayers

a. "Be pleased O God to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me."
Psalm 70:1 (Cassian)

b. "Lord Jesus, abide in me."

c. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." ("Jesus Prayer")

12. Including your breath prayer in the *Lectio Divina*

13. Assignment

a. Journaling question: Choose a simple breath prayer. Please write it. Record your reactions to using it.

b. Use your breath prayer creatively, as often as possible.

c. Continue *Lectio* with your breath prayer.

14. Closing prayer: (see Appendix I)

WEEK 6**The Divine Office****Beginning & Ending Each Day with God**

1. How is your *Lectio*?
 2. A thought: When Jesus commands us to “Be perfect as Your heavenly Father is perfect” what do you understand him to mean (Matt. 5:48)?
 3. Read and reflect upon St. Therese’s and Gregory’s understanding of perfection. (Small groups)
- “Dear Mother, I am very far from practicing what I understand, and still the desire alone I have of doing it gives me peace” (St. Therese 227).

Although on the whole my argument has shown that what is sought for is unattainable, one should not disregard the commandment of the Lord which says, *Therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect*. For in the case of those things which are good by nature, even if men of understanding were not able to attain everything, by attaining even a part they could yet gain a great deal.

We should show great diligence not to fall away from the perfection which is attainable but to acquire as much as possible: to that extent let us make progress within the realm of what we seek. For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness.

This is true perfection: not to avoid a wicked life because like slaves we servilely fear punishment, nor to do good because we hope for regards, as if cashing in on the virtuous life by some business-like arrangement. On the contrary, disregarding all those things for which we hope and which have been reserved by promise, we regard falling from God’s friendship as the only thing dreadful and we consider becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire. This, as I have said, is the perfection of life. (Gregory of Nyssa 1: 31; 2: 137)

4. Discussion Questions (Small groups)
 - a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
 - b. Where is your “scenic overlook”? Please describe it.
 - c. Therese of Lisieux, who in an earlier chapter was found seeking a spiritual elevator, had high goals for her spiritual life, but she also found herself falling short. Yet, she possessed great peace. How does she explain this seeming contradiction?

d. How does Gregory define Christian perfection? How does his concept of perfection compare with yours?

5. Singing the songs of the bride

6. Refreshments

7. Bible study: As you read the following Scriptures, notice how the Psalmist relates his prayer life to the different time of the day.

- Psalms 42:8 “The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, A prayer to the God of my life.”
- Psalm 77:6 “I will remember my song in the night; I will meditate with my heart, and my spirit ponders.”
- Psalm 92:1-2 “It is good to give thanks to the LORD And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning And Your faithfulness by night.”
- Psalm 119:55 “O LORD, I remember Your name in the night, And keep Your law.”
- Psalms 113:3 “From the rising of the sun to its setting The name of the LORD is to be praised.”
- Psalm 141:2 “May my prayer be counted as incense before You; the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.”
- Psalm 143:8 “Let me hear Your lovingkindness in the morning; For I trust in You.”

a. What would be the purpose in relating one’s prayer life to the different times of the day?

b. How might this help one move on toward Christian perfection as we have defined it?

8. My experience at a retreat with Dr. Mulholland, with the “Divine Office.” Another “Lever” and classical discipline

9. The Divine Office and Church history

10. Pass out Upper Room Worship Books (Eslinger); Practice in class

11. Assignment:

- a. Pray the Divine Office on a daily basis
- b. Journaling question: What will be your greatest obstacle to spending intentional time with God both morning and evening?

12. "A Liturgy for Evening Prayer" p. 114; The Upper Room Worship Book

WEEK 7

Pursuing the Bridegroom-King

1. How is your Divine Office?
2. A thought: Looking back upon your most significant human relationships, what are some things you did to pursue those relationships?
3. Read and reflect upon A. W. Tozer's prayer: (Small groups)

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need of further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, that so I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away." Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long. In Jesus' name, Amen. (20)
4. Discussion Questions (Small groups)
 - a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
 - b. Where is your "scenic overlook"? Please describe it.
 - c. What, based upon his above prayer, might be A. W. Tozer's understanding of Christianity?
 - d. How does his heart resonate with yours?
5. Singing the songs of the bride
6. Refreshments
7. Bible study: Song of Solomon 3:1-4
8. John Wesley's "Fire" illustration whereby he compares
 - a. Sins of Commission: These are more obvious and darken the soul more quickly. He compares them to the water being thrown on the fire of our spiritual life.
 - b. Sins of Omission: These are not as easily seen as the damage done

happens slowly and gradually. But these put out much more fire than the sins of commission. He compares these to the withdrawing of fuel from the fire (“The Wilderness State” 81).

9. Peter Marshal’s “The Keeper of the Spring”

10. Read Song of Songs 8:11-12

Only here, at the book’s very end do we see the bride serving her Bridegroom-King. Until this point the Bridegroom-King’s song has only spoken of their relationship. What then is the source of the Bridegroom King’s great joy, so much so that he must create a song above every song about her? His joy comes not primarily from her serving but from her loving, her desire and willingness to be pursued and healed, and pursue him continually.

11. Assignment:

- a. Journaling question: Prayerfully examine your fire this week. In what ways might you be throwing water upon it? In what ways might you be withholding fuel? What will you do differently to increase your fire?
- b. Continue with the “Divine Office.”

12. “A Liturgy for Night Prayer” p. 116; The Upper Room Worship Book

WEEK 8**When the Bridegroom Calls**

1. How is your Divine Office?
2. A thought: Think about a time when you either missed any type of opportunity or took advantage of one.
3. Read and reflect upon these words of Bernard of Clairvaux (Small groups)

Is it possible for spiritually alert individuals to miss a spiritual Bridegroom? He loves as much as he is loved. Why is he so elusive?

I can think of three explanations. It could be that we look for him at the wrong time, in the wrong way, or in the wrong location. All moments are not equal. This is why the prophet says, "Seek the Lord while he may be found" (Isaiah 55:6). This implies an inappropriate time exists when he may not be found. The prophet goes on to say, "Call on him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). There must be occasions when he is not near.

"I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:21). This is the time to seek and call. Right now. "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear" (Isaiah 65:24). (On the Song of Songs, 130)

4. Discussion Questions (Small groups)
 - a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
 - b. Where is your "scenic overlook"? Please describe it.
 - c. Have you in your life ever experienced God appearing to be nearer to you than others?
 - d. How do you account for this?
5. Singing the songs of the bride
6. Refreshments
7. Bible study: Luke 24:28-29; Song of Solomon 5:2-6; 2:7; 8:4
8. Assignment:
 - a. Journaling question: Listen for his voice calling you to "come away." Respond. Record your experience.

b. Continue with the Divine Office or the *Lectio Divina*.

9. “A Liturgy for Evening Prayer” p. 114; The Upper Room Worship Book

WEEK 9

Pt. 1: The Bridegroom's Request:

“Place Me as a Seal over Your Heart”

1. How is your Daily Office and/or *Lectio*?
2. A thought: Think about a time when someone protected you from harm
3. Read and reflect upon Susan Muto's words as she makes contemporary the words of John of the Cross. (Small groups)

When people become engaged, they bond together by mutual agreement. There is an exchange of gifts between them, as when the groom offers jewels and other ornaments to his future bride.

When people marry, they enjoy a more steady opportunity for communion and communication. Even though the gifts they exchanged when they were engaged may not now be as lavish, they enjoy the best gift of all: “union of persons.”

I draw these comparisons to help you to see what happens when the soul comes to the inner purity of willing only God's will for her. The only word in her heart and on her lips is “yes.” Other satisfactions and appetites, be they lower or higher, have no power over her. With Jesus she says, “Thy will, not mine, be done.” God's will and hers are one. Through her free consent, she, “has attained possession of God insofar as this is possible by the way of the will and grace.”

Again, I would compare this happening to the moment a young man proposes to the woman he loves and she says, “Yes.” If they are so happy in their earthly engagement, how much more must be the joy inherent in this “high state of spiritual betrothal between the soul and the Word, in which the Bridegroom favors it and frequently pays it loving visits wherein it receives wonderful delight.”

In the spiritual life, the soul espoused to God experiences the freedom that comes with detachment from creatures, but what seals the relationship from the bride's perspective are the visits she receives from her Bridegroom-to-be. The gifts he bestows upon her ready her even further for the union that will be theirs. But she has no power over God's timetable! He works in us “according to the mode of the soul.” Fast or slow, to a high or low degree, in our youth, middle, or old age—who knows when the Bridegroom shall come and what gifts he shall bear?

Then, this is a time of delicate deepening, comparable to what a bride-to-be must feel. She is engaged, deeply in love, and full of tender expectations pertaining to her marriage day. The more sublime the feeling of her being anointed by the Holy Spirit is, the more expectant she becomes. She is now on the

threshold of union with God! The proximate preparations are behind her, and she is on the eve of union. (68-69)

4. Discussion Questions (small groups)

- a. Please spend 5 full minutes reading/praying over the above quotation.
- b. Where is your “scenic overlook”? Please describe it.
- c. What do you understand the term “union” to mean?
- d. What would this “union” look like in a marriage relationship? In a relationship between the Bridegroom-King and his spiritual bride?

5. Singing the songs of the bride

6. Refreshments

7. Bible study:

- a. The Bridegroom’s desire: The sealing of the relationship, Song of Solomon 8:6-7.
- b. A strategy for sealing the relationship after the group is done: hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, annually.
 - 1) Mark 1:35: Spiritual self-formation
 - 2) Acts 2:42: Formation-in-common
 - 3) 1 Timothy 4:17: Formation-in-private

8. Assignment

- a. Journalistic assignment: Using the Spiritual Formation Plan handout (see Teaching Notes for this chapter), develop a prayed-through, realistic, workable plan, daily, weekly, and annually for your continued spiritual formation. Prepare to share this plan at our next and final session.

9. Continue with the Divine Office or the *Lectio Divina*.

10. “A Liturgy for Evening Prayer” p. 114; The Upper Room Worship Book

WEEK 10**Pt. 2: The Bride's Request:****“Place Me as a Seal Over Your Heart”**

1. How is your Daily Office and/or *Lectio*?
2. A thought: What is your greatest challenge as you go forth from this group?
3. Read and reflect upon these words of Mother Theresa: (Small groups)

I worry that some of you still have not really met Jesus—one to one—you and Jesus alone. We may spend time in chapel—but have you seen with the eyes of your soul how He looks at you with love? Do you really know the living Jesus—not from books but from being with Him in your heart? Have you heard the loving words He speaks to you? Ask for the grace; He is longing to give it.

Until you can hear Jesus in the silence of your own heart, you will not be able to hear Him say “I thirst” in the hearts of the poor. Never give up this daily intimate contact with Jesus as the real living person—not just the idea. How can we last even one day without hearing Jesus say, “I love you”—impossible. Our soul needs that as much as the body needs to breathe air. If not, prayer is dead—meditation only thinking. Jesus wants you each to hear Him—speaking in the silence of your heart.

Be careful of all that can block that personal contact with the living Jesus. The devil may try to use the hurts of life and sometimes your own mistakes to make you feel it is impossible that Jesus really loves you, is really cleaving to you. This is a danger for all of us. And so sad, because it is completely opposite of what Jesus is really wanting, waiting to tell you.

Not only that He loves you, but even more—He thirsts for you. Not only that He loves you, but even more—He longs for you. He misses you when you don't come close. He thirsts for you. He loves you always, even when you don't feel worthy. When not accepted by others, even by yourself sometimes—He is the one Who always accepts you. My children, you don't have to be different for Jesus to love you. Only believe you are precious to Him. Bring all you are suffering to His feet—only open your heart to Him to be loved by Him as you are. He will do the rest. (7-11)

- As we conclude our time together, where is God speaking to you through the heart of Mother Teresa? (Small groups)

4. Read and reflect upon these words of C. S. Lewis's Reepicheep in the book The Voyage of the Dawn Treader: (Small groups)

“No. Why should your Majesty expect it?” answered Reepicheep in a voice that most people heard. “My own plans are made. While I can, I sail east in the Dawn

Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan's country, or shot over the edge of the world in some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise." (184)

- Describe Reepicheep's heart. Where do you feel his heart in you?

5. Singing the songs of the bride

6. Refreshments

7. Read Song of Songs 8:6-7:

Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, Jealousy is as severe as Sheol; its flashes are flashes of fire, the *very* [original emphasis] flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, nor will rivers overflow it; if a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, it would be utterly despised.

- Here, the Bride describes the power of love. How do these words help to define the love of your Bridegroom-King to you? And you to him?
- Reflect upon Therese of Lisieux's response to some seemingly very difficult news. Relate her heart to the bride's in the above Scripture:

God granted me, last year, the consolation of observing the fast during Lent in all its rigor. Never had I felt so strong, and this strength remained with me until Easter. On Good Friday, however, Jesus wished to give me the hope of going to see Him soon in heaven. Oh! How sweet this memory really is! After remaining at the Tomb until midnight, I returned to our cell, but I had scarcely laid my head upon the pillow when I felt something like a bubbling stream mounting to my lips. I didn't know what it was, but I thought that perhaps I was going to die and my soul was flooded with joy. However, as our lamp was extinguished, I told myself I would have to wait until the morning to be certain of my good fortune, for it seemed to me that it was blood I had coughed up. The morning was not long in coming; upon awakening, I thought immediately of the joyful thing that I had to learn, and so I went over to the window. I was able to see that I was not mistaken. Ah! My soul was filled with a great consolation; I was interiorly persuaded that Jesus, on the anniversary of His own death, wanted me to hear His first call. It was like a sweet and distant murmur that announced the Bridegroom's arrival. (St. Therese of Lisieux 210-11)

- How has your experience of his love for you changed you over these ten weeks?
How has your love for him changed you?

8. Share your complete formation plan for the continued sealing of your Bridegroom-King/bridal relationship.
9. Commissioning service, prayer, laying on of hands
10. Shall we meet again for fellowship, prayer, and accountability?
11. Closing prayer (see Appendix I)

APPENDIX C

Teaching Notes

Week One:

Beginning to Know Jesus as Our Bridegroom-King

1. Bible Study: Tracing the theme of God/Christ as the divine Bridegroom and Israel/Church as his Bride through the Old and New Testaments

As I approach the Song of Solomon, the inevitable question of interpretation comes immediately to the forefront. This is much more than a story about a bridegroom and a bride. A. B. Simpson, in his book Loving as Jesus Loves, maintains a biblical warrant that this magnificent bridegroom can ultimately represent the ultimate Bridegroom, Jesus, and this unblemished bride represent, both individually and collectively, the ultimate bride, his Church (1-5).

I believe that such a warrant is justified. Solomon was probably not thinking of God as the bridegroom and his bride as the Church. However, when Jeremiah (31:15) spoke of great weeping, he surely was not envisioning Herod's slaughter (Matt. 2:8). When Hosea wrote of God calling his son out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1), he appears to have been referring only to the Exodus, yet Matthew interprets the young Jesus and his parents' exodus from Egypt as fulfilling Hosea's statement (Matt. 2:15). In the very same way, I believe that Jesus and his Church fulfill or bring fullness to the bridegroom and bride of the Song of Solomon. I support this by tracing the motif of God as husband and his people as his bride throughout Scripture.

1. God takes Israel to be his wife at Sinai (Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16:8).
2. Israel continuously commits adultery through her brazen idolatry (Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16:28).
3. God looks forward to a time when he will know Israel as a faithful wife who genuinely knows the Lord (Hos. 2:19-20; Isa. 62:4-5).
4. Jesus of Nazareth is introduced as the bridegroom by John the Baptist (John 3:28-29).
5. Jesus the Bridegroom is rejected by faithless Israel, his would-be bride (Matt. 21:33-42).
6. Jesus rejects physical Israel as God's covenant people (Matt. 21:43).
7. The Church of Jesus Christ becomes God's new Israel (Acts 2; Rom. 2:28-9; Gal. 6:16).
8. This new Israel, the Church, is the present-day bride of Christ, fulfilling Hosea 2:19 (Eph. 5:21-32).
9. This bride is presently betrothed to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2-3).
10. The Bridegroom will one day return to earth, bringing part of his bride,

to receive the remaining members of his bride unto himself (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

11. The actual, eternal marriage between Jesus the Lamb and his bride will then take place in the new heaven and new earth at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9; 20:2; 21:1-2, 9).
12. Today in this betrothed state of expectancy, the bride and the Spirit are yet inviting all, through the blood of the Bridegroom-Lamb, to become the bride of this Bridegroom-Lamb (Rev. 7:14).
13. Clearly this is a major motif woven throughout Scripture in a way that awesomely illustrates God's loving actions in his history of salvation. Clearly as we shall also see, the Song of Solomon is a picture of both an ideal bridegroom and a healed and ideal bride. Certainly then this Song must illustrate in many ways that ideal relationship of Jesus the Bridegroom to his Church and vice versa.

2. The Song of Solomon's place in Church history and the mind and heart of John and Charles Wesley

- **Church History**

This popularity of the Song of Songs similarly can be observed within the literary history of interpretation. A cursory glance at the index to the *Patrologia Latina* amply demonstrates this fact. That index lists 32 Latin Commentaries on the Song of Songs written from the time of Jerome and Ambrose to Peter Damian in the eleventh century. By comparison the important epistle of Paul to Galatians comes under study only six times, the epistle to the Romans only nine. Within the same time frame, the Gospels of Mark and John receive barely half the attention, with only thirteen and sixteen Latin studies within the index (Kallas 323).

- **John Wesley**

The design of the book is to describe the love and happy marriage, but it is not to be understood concerning Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter (although the occasion may be taken from that, or rather he makes an allusion to that) but concerning God, or Christ and His church and people.... This book is to be understood allegorically concerning the spiritual love and marriage between Christ and His church. And this will be more than probable to any man who shall consider the following particulars:

1. That the Scriptures of both of the Old and New Testament are full of allegorical passages; which being known and confessed, it is needless to prove.

2. That the doctrine of Christ being the head, and husband, of God's church or people, was well known, at least to the prophets and the wise and pious Israelites in the time of the Old Testament.
3. That God compares Himself to a bridegroom and the Church to a bride ... and calls and owns himself the husband of His people. In which places, by comparing these with many other texts of Scripture, by God, or the Lord, is meant Christ, the second Person of the Godhead Who then was to come down and since did come from heaven to earth for that eternal design of marriage between God and His people.
4. That the forty-fifth Psalm, which is a kind of an abridgement of this Book, although it alludes to the marriage between Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter, was written concerning the Messiah, which all interpreters both Christian and Jewish agree.

From these considerations and many others which might be suggested, it is sufficiently manifest, that the scope of this book is to describe the mutual love, union, and communion which is between Christ and His church.
(Wesley, Notes on the New Testament)

- **Charles Wesley**

In his excellent book The Wesley Hymns, Lawson has meticulously combed through many of Charles' hymns, providing Charles' Scripture references for each line of hymnody! He lists the following hymns and lines of those hymns as being influenced by the Song.

1. "Jesu, Lover of My Soul" (88) ... Jesu, lover of My Soul: Song Sol. 2:10
2. "See Where Our Great High Priest" (=1st line) (42)

 Jesu, on Thee we feed Along the desert way,
 Thou art the living Bread Which doth our spirits stay (Song Sol. 2:5)
 And all who in this banquet (Song Sol. 2:4) Lean on the staff of life divine
3. "Desiring to Love" (121) For love I sigh, for love I pine (Song Sol. 2:5; 5:8)
4. "The Shepherd of Israel and Mine" (1st line) (16)

For closer communion I pine (SOS 5:8) I long to reside where
Thou art (3:4) The pasture I languish to find (1:7) Or rise to be hid
in Thy breast (1:13)

5. "My God! I know, I feel Thee mine" (1st line) (145)

My God! I know, I feel Thee mine (2:16, 6:3) And will not quit my
claim (3:4)

6. "Come All Who Truly Bear" (1st line) (169) That He is ours and we are
His (2:16)

7. "Jesu, We Thus Obey" (1st line) (173)

Our hearts we open wide (5:2) His house of banqueting is this (2:4)
And He hath brought us here His banner over us is spread (2:4)

8. "Come We that Record" (1st line) (175) Do this, & be fed with the love
of the Lord (2:3-4)

9. I "Come and Let Us Sweetly Join" (188) Come, and sit, and banquet
there (2:4)

Lawson goes on to write, "Certainly we cannot understand the Wesleys' attitude to Scriptural doctrine without taking full account of the method of allegory. It provides some of the most effective of Charles Wesley's poetry and devotional writing" (39).

Concerning the hymn, "Thou Shepherd of Israel, and Mine" (1st line), Lawson writes the following:

The succeeding lines of this same hymn:

For closer communion I pine I long to reside where thou art.
The pasture I languish to find Where all who their Shepherd obey

contain allusions to the Song of Solomon ... 5:8, 3:4, and 1:7. It may indeed appear strange to many modern readers to understand the outspoken imagery of the Song of Solomon as ... referring to Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church. There has been a well-established tradition in the church that Canticles may be expounded with reference to Christ. The matter is clinched for this hymn because in the original the Wesleys printed the reference Canticles 1:7 at the head. The explorer of Wesley must be mentally prepared to follow him into many spiritual and allegorical renderings of a variety of texts, which are of devotional rather than of academic value. (16)

Again, that for which Lawson would use the term allegory, I would understand to mean in the truest sense, typology.

Teaching Notes

WEEK TWO

***Lectio Divina* Face-to-Face: Into the Bridegroom-King's Chambers**

1. Bible Study: Two ways to relate to our Bridegroom-King

a. 1:4 “Draw me after you *and* let us run *together*! The king has brought me into his chambers.” [emphasis mine]

i. Side by Side “let us run together” (will be dealt with in a later session)

ii. Face to face “The king has brought me into his chambers.”

1. Psalms 27:4-8

2. Luke 10:38-42

3. 2 Corinthians 3:18

The bridegroom offers two types of communication in this relationship. The first mentioned is that of running together. Here the bride and bridegroom are side by side, moving together toward a particular goal or goals. This is the more frequent of the two types as it can occur at any time, during literally any activity. The bride while in the midst of her work may not be able to stop everything and fix every bit of her attention upon her bridegroom, but she can always work alongside him, close enough to still commune with him. Thus in this side-by-side mode of being present with and to him, she may continually know his presence without laying aside the service he has graciously given her to do.

The second type is that most beautiful of communications, which can only be realized when the King/Bridegroom has invited his bride inside his chamber. Here communication is not side by side but face to face (Ps.27:4-8). Here, early in the morning, before her mind is already occupied with the cares of the day, her divine Lover invites her into his private chamber (the Holy of Holies). As she enters she notices that no one else is there. She turns to see her Bridegroom close but not lock the door. All competing influences have now been shut out for a time. She realizes that this is a special and privileged time. Many responsibilities await her outside the door, but at present all her attention is fixed and invested in only him. She is keenly cognizant that she must not get up and leave before he is ready. Since she knows that he is the King of that which occurs on both sides of the door, she can “become in His eyes as one Who finds peace” (8:10). Here like Mary (Luke 10:39) she will sit at his feet and listen to the Words of her

Lord with unveiled face (2 Cor.3:18) being transformed into the same image from glory to glory!

May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine. Your oils have a pleasing fragrance, Your name is like purified oil; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you and let us run together! The king has brought me into his chambers. (Song Sol. 1:2-4)

These beginning verses of the Song have helped me so much! What are the words that can adequately describe the intimacy of a kiss? Whose imagination can comprehend the joy, which immediately accompanies the sound of the name of one's beloved? Such intimacy then is the stuff out of which a Christian's devotional life is both created and created for. And where are all the many rules and commands that are so quickly associated with following Jesus? The only rule in this song is love. Beginning in the first few verses and continuing through the entire eight chapters, is a picture of a relationship, always dynamic, growing, and reciprocal, often exciting, never dry, and anything but codified subjugation.

Within verse four is, I believe, the heart cry of the Church: "Draw me after you." The bride greatly desires to give her full attention to her bridegroom but yet finds that she is pulled in so many different and competing directions. She knows that only his wooings and attractions will be able to overcome the powerful seductions of the many other voices in her life. This heart cry is certainly my prayer for my devotion to my Bridegroom is far too much like Hosea's morning cloud—here for a while and then suddenly gone.

In this same verse, there are two different types of communication. These two types together make the devotional life possible. The first type is spoken of as the bridegroom and bride running together. Here the bride is present with her bridegroom, but her full attention is not fixed upon him. They can talk to one another at any time, and she is free to fix her attention elsewhere while doing her daily service. Still they are constantly side by side always in the presence of each other.

The second type of communication is, I believe, the most precious. Here the bridegroom invites his chosen bride into his private chamber. He closes the door for there must be no distractions, only him. (Martha, are you listening?) While the above side-by-side style is the more frequent, this face-to-face time is the more intimate. Certainly this is what my Bridegroom desires that our devotional time resemble. Because this is what he desires, I am reminded that I must not think of this devotional time as "mine" but "ours." It is for his sake, as well as mine for "I am my beloved's and his desire is for me" (6:10).

And so I longingly pray:

Lord, Draw me after you. And as you do, enable my heart to feel and hear your voice calling me to come apart unto you. Make a place for me to sit at your, my Bridegroom's, feet where I can hear your every Word and

clearly see your face, thus enabling me to be transformed into your image from one degree of glory to another. And make me, like Mary, to sit at your feet. Be present to me; it's you I must meet. Distractions and worries surrounding my heart, Are coming between us. O make them depart.
(Maddox)

2. Today, a method of relating in a face-to-face manner with our Bridegroom-King within his chambers will be presented: The *Lectio Divina*.
3. A brief history of the *Lectio Divina* as one of the classical disciplines.

It is no surprise that it [*Lectio Divina*] is both one of the oldest and most popular of all forms of prayer in the Christian tradition.

Lectio Divina is a method of prayer that goes back to the fourth and fifth centuries. Easily and quickly translated as "sacred reading" it can be that only; but using sacred reading as the base, it becomes a ladder of escalation or intensification of prayer with four steps: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

In all likelihood the monastic practice of *Lectio Divina* was brought to the west by the Eastern desert fathers by John Cassian at the beginning of the fifth century. However, it has been closely related to St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality since its development and popularity began in the communities ... founded by St. Benedict.

Corresponding to the four basic psychological functions, there are four steps to *Lectio Divina* which call forth the use of each of these functions. (1) *Lectio* (Reading) uses the Senses either in spiritual reading or in perceiving the works of the Lord. (2) *Meditatio* (Meditation) uses the psychological function of Thinking (intellect) to reflect upon the insights presented in *Lectio*. (3) *Oratio* (Prayer) calls forth one's Feeling function to personalize the new insights so that one may enter into a personal dialogue or communication with God. (4) Finally in *Contemplatio* (Contemplation) one's Intuition is used in order to coalesce the experience of the previous three steps. In this time of quiet one is open to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit which may come by way of new insights, new perceptions, or a new infusion of peace, joy, and love which is part of the mystical union of which the saints tell us.

Lectio Divina is a method of prayer that is suitable for both the beginner and the spiritually advanced. Its progress from hearing the Word of God to studying it, reflecting upon it, praying upon it and adapting it to our situation leads one deeper and deeper into the longed-for union with God. (Michael and Norrissey 31-33)

Benedict was thoroughly immersed in the two hundred years of monastic tradition that preceded him. He makes greater use of St. Augustine. He

knows the Egyptian sources, ... St John Cassian, as well as St. Basil. Other early Latin monastic writings ... were also known and used by him.

Saint Benedict would not have seen himself as an innovator. His way was simply the monastic way. His task was to codify that way for his own community and other communities, which might find the system useful. His way was marked by moderation in all things, the simplicity of a life lived in common, reticence in speech, humble obedience to a spiritual master, the willingness to allow personal ambition and career to be set aside for the good of the community, work and prayer, and a discipline known as *lectio divina*.

There is no explanation of *lectio divina*, prayerful reading of Scripture, in the Rule, so much was it a part of monastic culture. It is already assumed in the very first word Benedict wrote, "Listen." The monk was formed by constantly listening to God's Word in Scripture. This was of course the effect of the daily Divine Office, but it extended beyond this as they worked and rested. Lacking easy access to books, the monk memorized as much of Scripture as possible and meditated on it throughout the day ... by quietly repeating them over and over ruminating upon their meaning. This rumination moved the monk to prayer and prayer moved the monk to love. In this way the monk sought to be transformed into another Christ, to "prefer nothing whatever to Christ." (Cotter 2-3 6)

As to the need of the classical disciplines, which the masters give, explain, and model for us, Robert Mulholland, in his Invitation to a Journey, writes,

We tend to think of the classical spiritual disciplines of the body of Christ as secondary or even optional to the real spirituality of our own private spiritual disciplines. But the classical disciplines serve to bring our lives into, and hold our lives in, God's environment for wholeness in Christ.

Also it is very difficult to maintain genuine personal disciplines without the scaffolding of the classical disciplines of the body of Christ. The classical disciplines give us the support structure within which our own spiritual disciplines become means of grace for the transformation of our being into the wholeness of Christ. (105)

4. Pass out and explain my version of *Lectio Divina*.

THE DISCIPLINE OF FACE-TO-FACE SPIRITUAL READING (OR) HOW HIS BRIDE MAY READ HER LOVE LETTER

1. Silence (kneeling)

- a commitment to Christ of a set minimum number of minutes during the best time of day (Ps. 31:5, 15)
- preparing my heart to meet my Bridegroom-King (Ps. 45:10-11; 16:11; Matt. 9:23-25; Song Sol. 1:4;)
- Matt. 6:6; Rev. 3:20; Luke 24:31-32 (closed door, opened door, opened eyes, opened Scripture)
- Breath Prayer
- an inner shift from
 - control to surrendered receptivity (as with one's trusted physician, only more so)
 - information to formation and transformation
 - observation to obedience

2. Reading (two versions of the Scriptures)

- reading and receiving/"tasting"/enhanced by using a wide variety of my senses
- "Lord, slow me, then show me."
- reading the brief passage silently and then out loud

3. Meditation (begin journaling)

- processing what I've read/"chewing"/"scenic overlook reading"
- involves thinking, understanding, and comprehending

4. Prayer (responding to his Word to me in steps 3 and 4)

- a personal, from my heart, dialogue with my Bridegroom-King
- sharing my feelings with God such as love, joy, sorrow, anger, repentance, desire, need, conviction, and consecration

5. Contemplation (kneeling)

- yielding, and waiting upon God—"Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10)
- a posture of relaxed waiting upon God for whatever he wants to do in me, with me, and through me (John 3:29)
- breath prayer/praise songs/"When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion ... our mouths were filled with laughter" (Ps. 126; Hag. 2:7, 9)
- "Truly I have set my soul in silence and peace like a weaned child at its mother's breasts" (Ps. 131:2)

6. Obedience (into His world)

- fully and immediately
- being to doing (Song Sol. 8:12)
- "Whatever light you then receive should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve begin to execute the

first moment you can” (Wesley 14: 243).

1. Silence

Psalm 31:5,15a “Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have ransomed me, O LORD, God of truth. My times are in Your hand.”

Psalm 45:10-11 “Listen, O daughter, give attention and incline your ear: forget your people and your father’s house; then the King will desire your beauty. Because He is your Lord, bow down to Him.”

Psalm 16:11b “In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.”

Matthew 9:32-25 “When Jesus came into the official’s house, and saw the flute-players and the crowd in noisy disorder, He said, ‘Leave; for the girl has not died, but is asleep.’ And they began laughing at Him. But when the crowd had been sent out, He entered and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.”

Song of Solomon 1:4a “Draw me after you ... the king has brought me into his chambers.”

Matthew 6:6a “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret.”

Revelation 3:20 “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.”

Luke 24:31-2 “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’”

5. Contemplation

Psalm 46:10 “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

John 3:29 “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.”

Psalm 126:1-2a “When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”

Haggai 2: 7, 9 “The desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the LORD of hosts.”

Psalms 131:2 “But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.”

6. Obedience

Song of Solomon 8:12 “But my own vineyard is mine to give; the thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon, and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.”

Teaching Notes

WEEK 3

The Shaming of the Bride

1. A brief examination of shame theory:

- a. The destructive force of toxic shame
- b. How shame differs from guilt

One day in our SF 800 class, we briefly spoke upon the issue of shame. As I began to understand the meaning of shame and how it differs from guilt, lights went on and bells began to ring inside my heart. I had partially known what this thing called shame was, but now I had a label for it and, therefore, a way to investigate and begin to comprehend it.

As the theory of shame began to intrigue me, I found myself suddenly applying it to the bride in the Song of Solomon. Much to my astonishment, I discovered that this esteemed young lady with a remarkable self-image had been horribly shamed by her family and companions. What then would be the explanation for her outstanding self-image? The healing love of her bridegroom! This relationship would, in the end, prove more powerful and more influential than all of her other relationships combined. This unique relationship would lift her out of her shame, bringing her victory in the very same places where she had been so horribly shamed. This Song of Songs was about, of all things, grace, hope, and healing! Honestly, I felt like Christopher Columbus discovering America!

Now, having discovered this marvelously healing book, I wanted to get out of my ship and search out this newly found territory for myself. I will include a brief understanding of shame theory as well as how it relates to the bride and appropriate illustrations.

I begin this brief description of shame as a novice, and a young one at that. My goal is to offer a brief, simple, usable understanding of shame. I rely almost completely upon Dr. Sandra D. Wilson and her book Released from Shame and Dr. John Bradshaw and his book Healing the Shame That Binds You. Both authors write of differing types of shame. Some are healthy and good, while another type is destructive and evil. It is this latter type that I summarize as it is the type experienced by Solomon's bride.

Bradshaw describes this destructive shame as toxic. Speaking of this toxic shame, he writes that this shame is "a state of being, a core identity," which gives a person "a sense of worthlessness." It is a "rupture of the self with self." "The self becomes an

object of its own contempt, an object that can't be trusted. Toxic shame is experienced as inner torment, a sickness of the soul" (10).

Dr. Wilson sees this binding shame as "rooted in childhood experiences in the family and in children's limited capacity to accurately interpret them" (29). "Parents and other adults put obstacles of false teachings in children's paths. Because they believe these lies are truth and act on them, the children might experience disastrous personal consequences" (30). Unrealistic expectations and/or abusive treatment teach the child lies such as "you are the kind of child who deserves disrespectful or dehumanizing treatment, that parents can do anything they want to you, and that God doesn't care" (31-32).

This abusive type of behavior and these unrealistic expectations were exactly the type of behavior experienced by the young girl who would one day become King Solomon's bride. Her self-image could have been permanently defaced. Clearly, her family and companions horribly shamed her. Then came the influence and relationship of her bridegroom, **AND THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING!**

2. Bible Study:

a. The Shaming of the Bride; Song of Songs 1:5-6

Theme #1: The Shaming of the Bride

Song of Solomon 1:5-6 "I am black but lovely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I am swarthy, for the sun has burned me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me caretaker of the vineyards, but I have not taken care of my own vineyard."

Other commentators such as Hudson Taylor, in his book Union and Communion, write that the bride's swarthinness or blackness of skin is evidence of her sin, thus requiring confession and forgiveness (16). I maintain that her particular problem is not one of having committed sin thus producing guilt, but rather that she has been abused, thus producing shame. This abuse has been committed by her mother, her brothers, and her companions, who are the daughters of Jerusalem. Her need, therefore, is not to experience forgiveness but healing.

Her abuse seems to have been begun by her brothers as they forced her to tend their own vineyards, which were their own responsibility. This abuse had at least three consequences. To begin, it caused her to ignore her own vineyard. This would have appeared to others as a lack of responsibility on her part, thus potentially providing a personal sense of failure as well as incurring condemnation from others. The second consequence of this abuse would have been the rejection and lack of love she would have daily experienced from her very own brothers, thus pushing her toward feelings of worthlessness. The third consequence of this abuse from her brothers was that it caused her skin to suffer from overexposure to the sun, thus causing it to darken and probably dry.

Secondly, her mother, through neglect and favoritism, abused her. Why she allowed the obvious abuse by her sons to continue is not known. By doing so, she clearly neglected her daughter's rights and needs, favoring her sons over, and at the expense of, her daughter. Thus her mother is communicating to her daughter that she is relatively unimportant and insignificant; she, the daughter, is thus worth less than her cruel and unloving brothers.

The third type of abuse is delivered by her companions who deride her for her dark, swarthy skin. This verbal abuse could easily bring with it feelings that she is inferior and undesirable. In short, she was shamed. And yet, where is her guilt? Where are her sins? Is she at fault here? Clearly in this passage she has not sinned and is not at fault. Thus she bears no true guilt. She has been shamed and shamed horribly. Her need, therefore, is not to experience forgiving grace but healing grace.

b. The bride's potential shame (1:5-6) contrasted to 1:1-4.

c. What happened? The real knowledge of and love of the Bridegroom-King is the solution to those who have been shamed.

3. In his book Wounds That Heal: Bringing Our Hurts to the Cross, Steve Seamands tells the magnificent story of the Bridegroom-King healing his bride. It is entitled "A Great Big Drop of Blood."

A Great Big Drop of Blood

Steve Clark, a minister and teacher from Australia, witnessed the dramatic power of the cross to overcome shame while he was leading a retreat for "Christians in the Air," a Christian organization for airline personnel. During the final session of the retreat, he conducted an informal communion service. The chairs in the room formed a large circle. The communion table stood in the center. During the singing of hymns and praise choruses, some prayed and others received the bread and cup. Persons could go to the table whenever they wished. A strong sense of God's presence filled the room.

As the service continued, Steve felt impressed to pray for a woman seated opposite him on the other side of the circle. Her refined, classic appearance made her stand out from the others. Her makeup and clothing were impeccable. As he asked the Holy Spirit to guide him in praying for her, a Scripture verse came to his mind: "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Heb. 9:14 KJV).

Although he didn't know why, Steve began to intercede for her along the implications of that verse. "Lord," he prayed, "If there is shame and guilt in her life, if there's uncleanness—whatever she's struggling with, lift it off her. By your blood come and free this woman." Suddenly, much to his surprise, the woman literally fell from her chair onto the floor and began to sob uncontrollably. Some

friends knelt beside her to comfort her. Not feeling prompted to join them, Steve simply sat where he was and kept praying for her.

Eventually the woman got up from the floor and sat back down. She seemed relieved but dazed. Soon afterward the service ended. The retreat was over, and everyone quickly packed up and headed home. Since Steve's plane was not scheduled to leave until the next morning, he went to spend the night with the couple who had organized the retreat.

About 10 o'clock that night, as Steve and the couple relaxed together in their home, they heard a knock at the door. It was the woman Steve had prayed for at the retreat. When he first saw her, Steve knew immediately that something was different about her appearance, but could not determine what it was.

After she came in and sat down, she said to Steve, "I apologize for coming over here so late like this, but I just had to tell you what the Lord did for me during the communion service.

"Before I committed myself to Christ a couple of years ago, I had lived a very promiscuous life. As I sat there this afternoon, I began thinking about all the different men I'd slept with. My life used to be so messed up that one night when I was drunk, I actually married someone. The next morning when I woke up, I didn't even know what I'd done. That's the kind of life I was living.

"And it was all rooted in my terrible shame. Because of what had happened when I was little, I felt utterly worthless and no good. I was ashamed to let anyone know who I really was—they would reject me if I did. Yet I needed their approval so desperately, especially the approval of men. I would do anything to get it.

"As a result my whole life centered around my appearance. How people saw me, to be attractive to men—those things meant everything to me and dominated my life. I couldn't even go to the corner store late at night to get a quart of milk without spending at least fifteen minutes in front of the mirror, making sure the makeup was just right and every hair was in place. I was a slave to that.

"After I came to know Christ a couple of years ago, I quit being promiscuous. But the guilt for the things I'd done, and the shame about myself was still there. So was the overwhelming need for approval. I wasn't free from all that, but I desperately wanted to be. During the communion service I pleaded with the Lord to come and do something for me."

Then she paused and looked sheepishly at Steve. "I don't know what you'll think of this, but while I was praying, I looked over at the corner of the room. There suspended just below the ceiling I saw this reddish cloud." She hesitated, "It looked like a great big drop of blood!

"I'm sure no one else saw, but *I* did. As I stared at it, it slowly began to move toward me until it was hovering over me. And then it seemed to burst and came flooding down upon me! That's when I fell onto the floor sobbing. And I know it's strange, but I just had to tell you. While I was lying there Jesus came and washed me in his blood. He cleansed me. He freed me. And now my terrible sense of guilt and shame is gone!"

At that point, it finally dawned on Steve what was different about the woman. She didn't have on any makeup. Not that there's anything wrong with wearing makeup. But that night by not wearing it, she made a bold statement,

witnessing to what Christ through his blood had done in her life. She no longer felt ashamed; she had nothing to hide. She could stand before God and others with confident boldness. Set free by his blood, her shame was gone.

Of course, she still faced a long journey toward wholeness. In place of her negative shame-based thinking patterns, she had to develop new positive thinking patterns based on her identity in Christ as a beloved daughter of God. Such change required a gradual, deliberate process, but the turning point came in that crisis moment. Because of Christ's dramatic work in her life that day, she could begin the journey. Shame's binding shackles were broken. She was ready now—with confident boldness—to move toward becoming the woman God had destined her to be.

Is there shame in our lives which needs to be brought to the cross of Christ? Do you see it? Right now, wherever you are—a great big drop of blood. (Seamands 54-57)

Teaching Notes

Week 4

The Healing of the Bride

Theme #2: The Self-Image of the Bride

Song of Solomon 2:1 "I am the rose of Sharon, The lily of the valleys."

2:16 "My beloved is mine, and I am his."

6: 3 "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

7:10 "I am my beloved's, And his desire is for me."

According to the New American Standard and New International Versions of the Bible, the bride (Church) and not the Bridegroom (Jesus) claims to be the lily of the valleys and the rose of Sharon! What an incredible self-image this formerly shamed bride possesses. Let us ask from where could she have obtained it. Certainly not from her mother, brothers, or companions! Surely it flows out of her relationship with her bridegroom! Thanks to this unique relationship of healing love and grace, she is fully aware that she is

- the rose of Sharon,
- the lily of the valleys,
- the one who belongs to her beloved, and
- the one who is greatly desired by her beloved.

Truly, as Jeanne Guyon maintains in her book The Song of the Bride, the bridegroom has made her fair with his own beauty (7)!

Theme #3: The Potential of the Bride as Seen through the Patient Eyes of the Bridegroom

Song of Solomon 4:12-16: "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, A rock garden locked, a spring sealed up. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates With choice fruits, henna with nard plants, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, With all the trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices. You are a garden spring, A well of fresh water, And streams flowing from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind, and come, wind of the south; make my garden breathe out fragrance, let its spices be wafted abroad. May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits!"

2:7 "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, That you do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases."

3:5 "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, That you will not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases."

8:4 "I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not arouse or awaken my love until she pleases."

The bridegroom looks at his bride, sees so much that she can become, and communicates that possibility to her. In his eyes she is a garden locked and a spring sealed. Does he, therefore, condemn her for not having realized her potential? Does he compare her to others? Absolutely not! Rather he prays for the wind to come over her (Ezekiel 36,36; Acts 2) and exercises mercy and patience. He will wait for her love, allowing her to progress at her own pace. He will not even allow others to push her. He will stand in waiting without condemning and thus shaming her for making him wait.

Theme #4: The Public and Unashamed Love of the Bridegroom for His Bride

2:4 "He has brought me to his banquet hall and his banner over me is love."

In her younger days, before she began to know her bridegroom, the bride had been the object of much public humiliation from her brothers, her mother, her companions, and from others who would have looked down upon her because her own vineyard was unkempt.

As these in her past publicly shamed her, now one in her present and future publicly accepts, embraces, and approves of her. The King's banquet was a public place! Here, the King, not just anyone by his actions publicly proclaims before the whole world, especially her former shamers, that he, the King, has chosen her! Listen to her heart as she exclaims, "He has brought me to his banquet hall." She can't believe it! Not only is the King not ashamed of her but is proud of his relationship with her, has chosen her, and she is his Song of Songs, the very best of all his songs! Before the world, with banners unfurled around them, he publicly proclaims to her, "I love you."

In the same way two thousand years ago, a Bridegroom-King was publicly accused, condemned, and finally killed on a hill for all to see. In his public death for his people, he unashamedly announced that he desires us, loves us, and has chosen us. Calvary became and still is the most magnificent public and unashamed display of love our world has ever or will ever see. His banner over us is agape love, and his banner was a cross upon which he himself publicly hung.

This cross, then, is a place where we may bring both our guilt and our shame. We bring our guilt in order to receive forgiveness. We bring our shame to be healed by his public, unashamed display of agape love, demonstrated there and poured out today by the living, resurrected Christ through his Holy Spirit. And we react, as did Solomon's bride, but, to a far greater extent! We are even more amazed! As Charles Wesley wrote in his hymn "And Can It Be":

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me who caused Him pain, for me who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God should die for me?

**Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God should die for me? [emphasis mine]
(363)**

Theme #5: The Bridegroom's Influence upon the Bride's Past Memories

Song of Solomon 3:1-4 "On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but did not find him. 'I must arise now and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I must seek him whom my soul loves.' I sought him but did not find him. The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, and I said, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves; I held on to him and would not let him go until I had brought him to my mother's house, and into the room of her who conceived me."

In reality, the bridegroom was never really lost, nor had he left her for long. Perhaps she began to fear that he had left her or perhaps she simply suddenly craved his nearness. I believe, however, that to understand her heart we must first ask why she was suddenly possessed by such an unusual need as to virtually drag her bridegroom to the house and room wherein her mother conceived her. I will posit that while on her bed she suddenly experienced remembrances of her past shame and abuse. Now she must not only find him but also require him to come to this place of her beginnings. Why? She has already received his healing love in the present. Now, somehow, she must know this healing for her past. This past, as we have already noted, consisted of many deep wounds. **If only she could get her bridegroom back into her past as well!** Therefore, she takes him into the room of her conception, bringing her bridegroom as best she can, to her furthestmost past with all his healing love and acceptance. As she holds tightly to him in this room of her beginnings, his unconditional love begins to overcome, conquer, and transcend her painful memories of abuse and subsequent shame. She is beginning to allow his light to expose and expel the darkness that has been hidden far away in cavernous regions deep within her heart of hearts. He speaks to those deep regions saying, "Though I only recently became your bridegroom, I have always known and loved you. When you were conceived, I was there, rejoicing! When your mother was in labor with you, I was there, rejoicing! When you were born I was there, rejoicing! **You have always** given me cause to sing!" She is being healed.

Theme #6: The Theme of Ultimate Victory

8:11-12 "Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he entrusted the vineyard to caretakers. Each one was to bring a thousand shekels of silver for its fruit. "My very own vineyard is at my disposal; the thousand shekels are for you, Solomon, and two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit."

Once upon a time in a young girl's life, vineyards had been a place of abuse and shame, a place she would have grown to despise. No doubt in those painful years, she would have exclaimed many times, "I will never, never care for another vineyard again." Even after

her actual abuse was over, her shame would have stayed with her, coloring her self-image and the way she would have viewed the world. Jean Vanier, in his book Community and Growth, describes these results of shame in a child's life:

When a child feels it does not belong to anyone, it suffers terrible loneliness and this is manifested in anguish. Anguish is like an inner agitation which affects the whole body, transforming the digestive and sleep patterns, bringing confusion, destroying all clarity about what to do, and how to act. It closes the child in on itself in feelings of uselessness and death, but also of anger and hatred which are intolerable. A child that feels unloved, knows it is not loveable; it is not good; it is evil. Loneliness is quickly transformed into terrible feelings of guilt. (13)

Her need, as I have already maintained, is not to be forgiven, but healed. The feelings of guilt that she believes possess her are actually feelings of shame.

Somehow, from somewhere, a transcendent love from outside of her wounded self must come to her. But from where might such a love come? Does such an all-encompassing, glory-sharing, healing love even exist? **THE ANSWER, OF COURSE, IS HER BRIDEGROOM!!**

Throughout their relationship he has been patiently and gently offering her healing. And throughout this healing relationship, he has been slowly but surely reintroducing her to vineyards as he has been replacing her abuse with respect, her wounds with wholeness, her rejection with acceptance, and her shame with kingly glory! In the first seven chapters of the song, vineyards are mentioned eight times. And the final evidence of her healing comes as Solomon gives her, of all things, a vineyard! Instead of fearing it, she embraces it. Where she had known only betrayal, she has learned to trust (her bridegroom). Instead of feeling shame, she senses victory. Notice her words, "[M]y very own vineyard" (Song Sol. 8:12). Thanks to her all-encompassing relationship with her bridegroom, she now anticipates success in the same arena where she (through no fault of her own) had known only failure.

And what does she do with her new success? She recognizes it as a gift of his grace and thanks him by returning one thousand shekels to him! **WHAT A DIFFERENCE EXISTS BETWEEN THE ABUSE AND SHAMING OF 1:6 AND THE VICTORY OF 8:12! And the reason for this great difference? HER RELATIONSHIP WITH HER BRIDEGROOM!** See what she has gained! And yet, her very best gift, her greatest gain is the bridegroom himself! For at a wedding, receiving generous wedding presents is wonderful, but for our bride and for us, his bride, the Church, the greatest gift of all is that the King has become her and our Bridegroom!

Teaching Notes

Week 5

The Breath Prayer

Walking Alongside Him

1. Story: The Way of a Pilgrim and the Pilgrim Continues His Way

a. The pilgrim's dissatisfaction

On the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost I went to church to say my prayers there during the liturgy. The first Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians was being read, and among other words I heard these—"Pray without ceasing." It was this text, more than any other, which forced itself upon my mind, and I began to think how it was possible to pray without ceasing, since a man has to concern himself with other things also in order to make a living. I looked at my Bible and with my own eyes read the words which I had heard, that is, that we ought to always, at all times and in all places, to pray with uplifted hands. I thought and thought, but knew not what to make of it. "What ought I do?" I thought. "Where shall I find someone to explain it to me?" I will go to the churches where famous preachers are to be heard; perhaps there I shall hear something that will throw light on it for me. I did so. I heard a number of very fine sermons on prayer—what prayer is, how much we need it, and what its fruits are—but no one said how one could succeed in prayer. I heard a sermon on spiritual prayer, and unceasing prayer, but how it was to be done was not pointed out. (French 3)

b. His search

Thus listening to sermons failed to give me what I wanted, and having had my fill of them without gaining understanding, I gave up going to hear public sermons. I settled on another plan—by God's help to look for some experienced and skilled person who would give me in conversation that teaching about unceasing prayer which drew me so urgently.

For a long time I wandered through many places. I read my Bible always, and everywhere. I asked whether there was not in the neighborhood a spiritual teacher, a devout and experienced guide, to be found. (French 4)

c. Finding a spiritual director

At last toward evening I was overtaken by an old man who looked like a cleric of some sort. In answer to my question he told me that he was a monk belonging to a monastery some six miles off the main road. He asked me to go there with him. "We take in Pilgrims," said he, "and give them rest and food with devout persons in the guesthouse." I did not feel like going. So in reply I said that my peace of

mind in no way depended upon my finding a resting place but upon finding spiritual teaching. Neither was I running after food, for I had plenty of dried bread in my knapsack.

“What sort of spiritual teaching are you wanting to get?” he asked me. “What is it puzzling you? Come now! Do come to our house, dear brother. We have startsi of ripe experience well able to give guidance to your soul and to set it upon the true path, in the light of the Word of God and the writings of the holy Fathers.” (French 6-7)

d. His director’s advice; his subsequent learning

We went into his cell and began to speak as follows. “The continuous interior prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine name of Jesus with the lips, in the spirit, in the heart, while forming a mental picture of His constant presence, and imploring His grace, during every occupation, at all times, in all places, even during sleep. The appeal is couched in these terms, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.’ One who accustoms himself to this appeal experiences as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always that he can no longer live without it, and it will continue to voice itself within him of its own accord. Now do you understand what prayer without ceasing is?” (French 9-10)

“If you would care to hear it, may I read you a little from The Philokalia?” I asked, taking up my copy. I found Peter the Damascene’s article, part three, page 48, and read as follows: “One must learn to call upon the name of God, more even than breathing—at all times, in all places, in every kind of occupation. The Apostle says, ‘Pray without ceasing.’ That is, he teaches men to have the remembrance of God in all times and places and circumstances. If you are making something, you must call to mind the Creator of all things; if you see the light, remember the Giver of it; if you see the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, wonder and praise the Maker of them. If you put on your clothes, recall Whose gift they are and thank Him Who provides for your life. In short, let every action be a cause of your remembering and praising God, and lo! You will be praying without ceasing and therein your soul will always rejoice.” (French 76)

He sees that truly to pray means to direct the thought and the memory, without relaxing the recollection of God, to walk in His divine presence, to awaken oneself to His love by thinking about Him, and to link the name of God with one’s breathing and the beating of one’s heart. He is guided in all this by the invocation with the lips of the most holy name of Jesus Christ, or by saying the Jesus prayer at all times and in all places and during every occupation, unceasingly. (French 163-64)

Thus, it is quantity that is assigned to man, as his share; frequency of prayer is his own, and within the province of his will. This is exactly what the Fathers of the church teach. St. Macarius the Great says truly to pray is the gift of grace. Isikhi says that frequency of prayer becomes a habit and turns into second nature,

and without frequent calling upon the name of Jesus Christ it is impossible to cleanse the heart. The venerable Callistus and Ignatius counsel frequent, continuous prayer in the name of Jesus Christ before all ascetic exercises and good works, because frequency brings even the imperfect prayer to perfection. Blessed Diadoch asserts that if man calls upon the name of God as often as possible, then he will not fall into sin. (French 167-68)

St. John of the ladder writes: "When the spirit is darkened by unclean thoughts, put the enemy to flight by the name of Jesus repeated frequently. A more powerful and effective weapon than this you will not find, in heaven or on earth." St. Gregory the Sinaite teaches thus: "Know this, that no one can control his mind by himself, and, therefore, at a time of unclean thoughts call upon the name of Jesus Christ often and at frequent intervals, and the thoughts will quieten down."

Christian soul, if you do not find within yourself the power to worship God in spirit and in truth, if your heart still feels no warmth and sweet satisfaction in mental and interior prayer, then bring to the sacrifice of prayer what you can, what lies within the scope of your will, what is within your power. Let the humble instrument of your lips first of all grow familiar with frequent persistent prayerful invocation. Let them call upon the mighty name of Jesus Christ often and without interruption. This is not a great labor and is within the power of everyone. This, too, is what the precept of the holy Apostle enjoins: By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name." (French 168-69)

2. John Cassian and the breath prayer

a. Cassian and Friends' Question to Isaac the Monk

The following we humbly feel would be the principles. First (is) to know the method of finding and holding God in our thoughts. Second would be to hold unshakably to this method, whatever that may be, for in this perseverance, we feel, lies the ultimate perfection.

Hence our anxiety to find a formula which will enable us to think of God and to hold incessantly to that thought so that, as we keep it in view, we may have something to return to immediately whenever we find that we have somehow slipped away from it. It will be there for us to take up once more without wasting time in searches or in painful detours. (Cassian 131)

b. Isaac's Response

I am not suggesting that you are simply at the doorway of true prayer. Rather your experience is such that you have touched upon the very central hidden mystery of prayer and have taken some hold of what it really is. And with the Lord as my guide it will not be too difficult to bring you in from the porch, where you walk uncertainly, and to lead you into the inner sanctum. Nor will you be prevented

from understanding what I wish to show you. One is very close to knowledge when one clearly recognizes the questions to be asked. (Cassian 132)

And what follows now is the model to teach you, the prayer formula for which you are searching. Every monk who wants to think continuously about God should get accustomed to meditating endlessly on it and to banishing all other thoughts for its sake. But he will not hold onto it unless he breaks free from all bodily concerns and cares. This is something which has been handed on to us by some of the oldest of the Fathers and it is something which we hand on to only a very few of the souls eager to know it: To keep of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: "Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue" (Psalm 69:2). (Cassian 132)

The thought of this verse should be turning unceasingly in your heart. Never cease to recite it in whatever task or service or journey you find yourself. Think upon it as you sleep, as you eat, as you submit to the most basic demands of nature. Sleep should come upon you as you meditate on the verse. This verse should be the first thing to occur to you when you wake up. The soul must grab fiercely onto this formula so that after saying it over and over again, after meditating upon it without pause, it has the strength to reject and to refuse all the abundant riches of thought. (Cassian 135-36)

Teaching Notes

Week 6

The Divine Office

Beginning & Ending Each Day with God

1. The Divine Office and Church history

The Divine Office: Theological Foundations

The Online Catholic Encyclopedia tells us the following regarding the history of the Divine Office within the Church:

The custom of reciting prayers at certain hours of the day or night goes back to the Jews, from whom Christians have borrowed it. In the Psalms we find expressions like: "I will meditate on thee in the morning"; "I rose at midnight to give praise to thee"; "Evening and morning, and at noon I will speak and declare: and he shall hear my voice"; "Seven times a day I have given praise to thee"; etc. (Cf. Jewish Encyclopedia, X, 164-171, s. v. "Prayer"). The Apostles observed the Jewish custom of praying at midnight, terce, sext, none (Acts, x, 3, 9; xvi, 25; etc.). The Christian prayer of that time consisted of almost the same elements as the Jewish: recital or chanting of psalms, reading of the Old Testament, to which was soon added reading of the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles, and at times canticles composed or improvised by the assistants. "Gloria in excelsis" and the "Te decet laus" are apparently vestiges of these primitive inspirations. At present the elements composing the Divine Office seem more numerous, but they are derived, by gradual changes, from the primitive elements. As appears from the texts of Acts cited above, the first Christians preserved the custom of going to the Temple at the hour of prayer.

The development of the Divine Office was probably in the following manner: The celebration of the Eucharist was preceded by the recital of the psalms and the reading of the Old and New Testaments. This was called the Mass of the Catechumens, which has been preserved almost in its original form. Probably this part of the Mass was the first form of the Divine Office, and, in the beginning, the vigils and the Eucharistic Synaxis were one. When the Eucharistic service was not celebrated, the prayer was limited to the recital or chanting of the psalms and the reading of the Scriptures. The vigils thus separated from the Mass became an independent office. During the first period the only office celebrated in public was the Eucharistic Synaxis with vigils preceding it, but forming with it one whole. In this hypothesis the Mass of the Catechumens would be the original kernel of the whole Divine Office. The Eucharistic Synaxis beginning at eventide did not terminate till dawn. The vigils, independently of the Eucharistic service, were

divided naturally into three parts; the beginning of the vigils, or the evening Office; the vigils properly so called; and the end of the vigils or the matutinal Office. For when the vigils were as yet the only Office and were celebrated but rarely, they were continued during the greater part of the night. Thus the Office which we have called the Office of evening or Vespers, that of midnight, and that of the morning, called Matins first and then Lauds, were originally but one Office.

At all events, during the course of the fifth century, the Office was composed, as today, of a nocturnal Office, viz. Vigils—afterwards Matins—and the seven Offices of the day, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Complin.

This development of the Divine Office, as far as concerns the Roman liturgy, was completed at the close of the sixth century. Later changes are not in essential points but rather concern additions.

The influence of St. Gregory the Great on the formation and fixation of the Roman Antiphonary, an influence that has been questioned, now appears certain (see “Dict. d’archéol. et de liturgie,” s.v. “Antiphonaire”). (Cabrol)

Historically, the Divine Office was and is a major part of The Rule of St. Benedict (Cotter). (Benedict lived between AD 480-547.) Recently, Benedictine priest Father Anthony Delisi, Superior wrote regarding the very great significance of this “Work of God” (the Divine Office) in his life:

For me, the outstanding section of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is not the individual breakdown of the Office, but the teaching that nothing is to be preferred to the work of God (Chapter 43:3). This is the work of the monk—to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. If you go into the documents of Vatican II you read that the Liturgy of the Hours is the prayer of Christ. It is Christ who is praying through us today. Our Lord is praying through us today in Conyers. This is our principal work.

Our Constitution is the 21st century interpretation of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. The Constitution tells us that in no small way does the salvation of the world depend upon this praying of the Liturgy of the Hours (Sec. 19.1). If the salvation of the world depends on the praying of these Hours then we have to put them in the place of importance where they belong.

At the Divine Office is the prayer of Christ, and I share in it today. Those hinge hours of the Office—Lauds and Vespers—should be primary and outstanding in our life. It makes us who we are: monks. “Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (43:3).

Teaching Notes

Week 7

Pursuing the Bridegroom-King

1. Bible Study: 3:1-4

“On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but did not find him. ‘I must arise now and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I must seek him whom my soul loves.’ I sought him but did not find him. The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, *and I said*, ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’ Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves; I held on to him and would not let him go.”

- a. Her self-deception: “On my bed I sought him”;
- b. Her realization: “But did not find him”;
- c. Her discontentment (Implied): “I am not willing to remain in this state”;
- d. Her resolve: “I will arise now”;
- e. Her searching: “In the streets and in the squares”;
- f. Her initial failure: “I sought him but did not find him”;
- g. Her request to others for help: “The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, And I said, ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’”; and,
- h. Her success: “Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves; I held on to him and would not let him go.”

2. John Wesley’s “Fire” illustration; whereby he compares

- a. Sins of Commission: These are more obvious and darken the soul more quickly. He compares them to the water being thrown on the fire of our spiritual life.
- b. Sins of Omission: These are not as easily seen as the damage done occurs slowly and gradually. Nevertheless, these put out much more fire than the sins of commission. He compares these to the withdrawing of fuel from the fire (“The Wilderness State” 81).

2. Peter Marshall’s, “The Keeper of the Spring”

The late Peter Marshall, an eloquent speaker and for several years the chaplain of the United States Senate, loved to tell the story of the “Keeper of the Spring,” a quiet forest dweller who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slope of the Alps.

The old gentleman had been hired many years earlier by a young town councilman to clear away the debris from the pools of water up in the mountain crevices that fed the lovely spring flowing through their town. With faithful, silent

regularity, he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches, and wiped away the silt that would otherwise have choked and contaminated the fresh flow of water.

The village soon became a popular attraction for vacationers. Graceful swans floated along the crystal clear spring, the mill wheels of various businesses located near the water turned day and night, farmlands were naturally irrigated, and the view from restaurants was picturesque beyond description.

Years passed. One evening the town council met for its semiannual meeting. As they reviewed the budget, one man's eye caught the salary figure being paid the obscure keeper of the spring. Said the keeper of the purse, "Who is the old man? Why do we keep him on year after year? No one ever sees him. For all we know, the strange ranger of the hills is doing us no good. He isn't necessary any longer. By a unanimous vote, they dispensed with the old man's services.

For several weeks, nothing changed.

By early autumn, the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools, hindering the rushing flow of sparkling water. One afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the spring. A few days later, the water was much darker. Within another week, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks, and a foul odor was soon detected. The mill wheels moved more slowly, some finally ground to a halt. Swans left, as did the tourists. Clammy fingers of disease and sickness reached deeply into the village.

Quickly, the embarrassed council called a special meeting. Realizing their gross error in judgment, they rehired the old keeper of the spring, and within a few weeks, the veritable river of life began to clear up. The wheels started to turn, and new life returned to the hamlet in the Alps.

Once upon a time a man became a Christian. He started having a quiet time with the Lord each day. He would read his Bible and spend time in prayer. His life was filled with joy and peace. His walk with God was beautiful and many sought his wisdom and insight. However, one day, as he looked at his life, he noticed that if he quit his quiet time and spent those valuable moments on more pressing matter, he could accomplish so much more.

For a while, he enjoyed the extra time he had for more important matters. Then he noted that his life was not as peaceful as it had been. He was experiencing more and more stress. His heart became darker. There was not as much to be joyful about. Attending church was boring and Sunday school was a total waste.... I think you get the idea. Our quiet time with God does not often produce quick results. It takes time for it to flow down from God's throne to our lives. We must always remember, the quiet "Keeper of the Spring" could be the difference between life and death.

4. Song of Songs 8:11-12

"Solomon had a vineyard at Baal-hamon; he entrusted the vineyard to caretakers. Each one was to bring a thousand *shekels* of silver for its fruit. My very own vineyard is at my disposal; The thousand *shekels* are for you, Solomon, And two hundred are for those who take care of its fruit."

Only here, at the book's very end, do we see the bride serving her Bridegroom-King. Until this point it has been 100 percent relational. What, then, is the source of the Bridegroom-King's great joy that he must create a song above every song about her? It is not her serving but her loving, her desire and willingness continually both to be pursued and pursue, that brings forth his joyful song.

Being" takes priority over "doing." "Doing" flows out of "being."

Here then, in relationship is the place of healing for one's self-image. Thus the healed bride bases her identity not primarily upon what she does for her bridegroom-king, but upon her continual experience of his dynamic and yet unchanging love, as well as his willingness to seek her love.

Teaching Notes

Week 8

When the Bridegroom Calls

1. Bible Study: Read the stories below

“And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. But they urged Him, saying, ‘Stay with us, for it is *getting* toward evening, and the day is now nearly over.’ So He went in to stay with them.” **Luke 24:28-9**

I was asleep but my heart was awake. A voice! My beloved was knocking: ‘Open to me, my sister, my darling, My dove, my perfect one! For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the damp of the night.’

“I have taken off my dress, how can I put it on *again*? I have washed my feet, how can I dirty them *again*?

“My beloved extended his hand through the opening, and my feelings were aroused for him.

“I arose to open to my beloved; and my hands dripped with myrrh, & my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the bolt. “I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away *and* had gone! My heart went out *to him* as he spoke. I searched for him but I did not find him; I called him but he did not answer me.” **Song of Solomon 5:2-6**

a. What happened? Restate the stories in your own words.

b. In the first story (Luke),

- i. Why did Jesus act as though he was going further?
- ii. Could the two with him have just said, “Okay”?
- iii. What if they had?

c. In the second story (Song of Solomon),

- i. Why did the bride refuse her bridegroom-king’s overtures?
- ii. Were her concerns justified?
- iii. Why did her bridegroom-king leave?

d. What are the implications of these two stories for the person who desires to actively pursue his/her relationship with his/her Bridegroom-King?

e. Contrast the bride of the Song in 5:2-6 with John Wesley on the evening of his conversion.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death. [original emphasis] (The Works of John Wesley 103)

"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you do not arouse or awaken *my* love until she pleases." "I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not arouse or awaken *my* love until she pleases." 2:7; 8:4.

- i. What do these words tell us about our Bridegroom-King's attitude toward us when we who love him, decline his advances?
- ii. How does this help us respond to him when we fail him?

Teaching Notes

Week 9

Pt.1: The Bride's Request:

“Place Me as a Seal over Your Heart”

1. Read Song of Songs 8:6-7

Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, jealousy is as severe as Sheol; its flashes are flashes of fire, the *very* flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, nor will rivers overflow it; if a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, it would be utterly despised.

- a. What is the bridegroom-king's request of his bride?
 - b. What would be the purpose of her placing a seal over her heart?
2. Three ways to affect the sealing of our hearts from Epiphany Manual on the Art and Discipline of Formation-in-Common (Muto and Kaam 13-16)
- a. **Spiritual Self-Formation**: Here is where, like Jesus, I get away from everything and everyone but God. The reading of Scripture and the masters, along with prayer, are the key ingredients.
 - i. Mark 1:35 “In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left *the house*, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.”

Richard J. Foster, in his Devotional Classics, quotes Henri J. M. Nouwen, in his book Making All Things New,

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that he is actively present in our lives—healing, teaching, and guiding—we need to set aside a time and a space to give him our undivided attention.

One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.

This is the experience of anyone who decides to enter into solitude after a life without much spiritual discipline. At first, the many distractions keep presenting

themselves. Later, as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw. (Foster 95-96)

- b. **Formation-in-Common:** refers to those events where Christians, in the company of other groups of Christians, experience grace whereby they are more and more transformed into the image of Christ.

Acts 2:42 “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book Life Together, writes,

But God has put this Word into the mouth of others in order that it may be communicated to us. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find his living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of a man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth.

He needs his brother as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother’s is sure.

And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God permits them to meet together and gives them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and this “alien righteousness.” All we can say, therefore, is: the community of Christians springs solely from the Biblical and Reformation message of the justification of man through grace alone; this alone is the basis of the longing of Christians for one another. (22-23)

- c. **Formation-in-Private:** As Timothy had Paul, so Christians need these spiritually mature persons who can, with the help of Scripture and the masters, help them see their lives through God’s eyes.

1 Corinthians 4:17 “For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.”

Francis De Sales, in his Introduction to the Devout Life, writes,

Young Tobias, being commanded to go to Rages, answered, I know not the way: Go then, replied his father, and seek some man to conduct thee. I say the same to thee my Philothea; (if you) would you walk in earnest towards devotion, seek some good man who may guide and conduct you: this is the best advice I can give you. Though you search for the will of God (says the devout Avilla) you shall

never so assuredly find it as in the way of devout obedience, so much recommended and practiced by all holy persons who aspire after devotion.

But who shall find this friend? They that fear the Lord, answers the wise man: that is the humble who earnestly desire their spiritual advancement. Since then it concerns you so much Philothea, to travel with a good guide on this holy road to devotion, beseech God, with the greatest importunity, to furnish you with such a one as may be according to His own heart; and be assured he will rather send you an angel from heaven ... than fail to grant your request. (25-27)

The Masters as Spiritual Directors

Possible Spiritual Directors:

1. Sister Eileen Marie Flanagan (St Augustine: 904-824-5894; 823-9965)
2. Gladys Stewart (Mandarin: 904-354-3603; 354-1083)
3. Msgr. Vincent Haut (Jacksonville: 904-744-0833)

**My Spiritual Formation Plan for the Continual Bridal Sealing Of
My Relationship with My Bridegroom-King**

1. Daily

a. Self-Formation

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

b. Formation-in-Common

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

c. Formation-in-Private

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

2. Weekly

a. Self-Formation

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

b. Formation-in-Common

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

c. Formation-in-Private

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

3. Monthly

a. Self-Formation

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

b. Formation-in-Common

1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

c. Formation-in-Private

- 1) _____ 2) _____
3) _____ 4) _____

4. Annually

a. Self-Formation

- 1) _____ 2) _____

b. Formation-in-Common

- 1) _____ 2) _____

c. Formation-in-Private

- 1) _____ 2) _____

Week 10

Pt. 2: The Bride's Request:

“Place Me as a Seal over Your Heart”

No Teaching Notes

APPENDIX D

A Listing of Songs Recorded and Given to Small Group Members

Words and music are by Eugene Maddox and Rhonda McGinnis

I Am His Song

(Words: Verses 1 and 2 from an unknown author;
Verse 3: Eugene Maddox; Verse 4 Rhonda McGinnis
Music by Rhonda McGinnis
Vocals by Rhonda McGinnis)

Jesus is my bridegroom & I am his bride,
His banner over me is love.
Jesus is my bridegroom & I am his bride,
His banner over me is love.
Oh His banner, His banner over me-
His banner – Oh His banner over me.
His banner over me is love.

I am my beloved's and He is mine.
His banner over me is love.
I am my beloved's and He is mine.
His banner over me is love.
It's His banner – His banner over me.
His banner – His banner over me.
His banner over me is love. Sweet love.

My beloved is mine; His desire is for me
His banner over me is love.
My beloved is mine; His desire is for me
His banner over me is love.
Oh His banner, His banner over me-
His banner – Oh His banner over me.
His banner over me is love.

He rejoices over me and I am His song
And His banner over me is love.
He rejoices over me and I am His song
And His banner over me is love.
His banner over me is love.
Oh His banner, His banner over me-
His banner – Oh His banner over me.
His banner over me is love. Sweet love.

Words for the Bride (Ps. 45:9-10)
 (Words and Music by Eugene Maddox
 Vocals by Bethany Maddox))

Verse 1

Listen, O daughter, give attention, incline your ear;
 Listen, O daughter, give attention, incline your ear;
 Forget your people and your father's house,
 Then will the king desire your beauty.
 Because he is your lord, bow down to him.
 Because he is your lord, bow down to him.
 Forget your people and your father's house,
 And because he is your lord, bow down to him.

Verse 2

I love You my Jesus, my Bridegroom, my King.
 I love You my Jesus, more than anything.
 Your presence—my pleasure, at Your right hand my joy;
 And because You are my Lord, I worship You.
 Because You are my Lord, I bow down to You.
 Because You are my Lord, I bow down to You.
 I'm forgetting my people and my Father's house,
 And because You are my Lord, I worship You.

Tag

Because You are my Lord; You're my Lord, my only Lord.
 And because You are my Lord. I worship You.
 You have given me Your ring,
 You're my Beloved, My Bridegroom-King;
 And so I bow down to You and receive Your Name!

“Married” Shall Be Your Name! (Isa. 62:4-5)
 (Words and Music by Eugene Maddox
 Vocals by Bethany Maddox))

No longer shall they call you “Forsaken,”
 And your name your land “Desolate”;
 But you shall be called “My Delight Is in Her,”
 And “Married” shall be your name!

As a young man marries a maiden,
 So shall your sons marry you,
 As the bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
 So shall your God rejoice over you!

Shepherd Hands (Ps. 31:5,15a, dedicated to Ben Corbett)
(Words and Music by Eugene Maddox
Vocals by Bethany Maddox)

Verse 1

Into Your hands, Your nail-pierced hands;
I place my spirit, O Lord, into Your hands.
Into Your hands, Your shepherd-hands, O Lord,
I commit my spirit, safe within Your hands.

Chorus

For You have ransomed me, Your Blood washes over me.
Your love makes my fears to flee,
God of truth and eternity.
You have ransomed me; Your Blood washes over me;
Your love makes my fears to flee,
God of truth, You have ransomed me.

Verse 2

Into Your hands, Your nail-pierced hands;
I place my times, O Lord, into Your hands.
Into Your hands, Your shepherd-hands, O Lord,
I commit my times, safe within Your hands. Chorus.

Through the Eyes of Your Love (*Song of Sol. 1:5-6*)
(Words by Eugene Maddox
Music and vocals by Rhonda McGinnis)

Let me see me.
Let me see me, my Lord,
Through the eyes of Your love.
Jesus, please set me free!
Let me see me
The way You see me, my Lord:
Beautified by Your love
Through Your Spirit in me.

To the “Ladies of Jerusalem” (*Song of Songs 1:5-6*)
(Words and music by Eugene Maddox
Vocals by Bethany Maddox)

Verse 1

You are wrong; you are wrong.
Though my life was stained by shame,
Now I'm His song!
My heart hears! My heart longs!
I'm being healed; I am His bride,
His Song of Songs!

Verse 2

Though skin be dark And oh so dry,
I see myself with new sight
Through His eyes!
Do not stare; rather, know
My king has come, His love I wear,
My life I owe.

Verse 3

And forced to do my brothers' toil,
In my vineyard I neglected
My own soil.
But from that mire, He lifted me,
Loved me in His bannered hall
And now I'm free!

Verse 4

So you are wrong; you are wrong.
Though my life was stained by shame,
Now I'm His song!
My heart hears! My heart longs!
I'm being healed; I am His bride,
His Song of Songs.
I'm being healed; I am His bride,
His Song of Songs.

Under The Tree (*Song Sol. 8:5*)
(Words and music by Eugene Maddox
Vocals by Bethany Maddox)

Under the Tree, under the Tree,
Under the Tree is where I brought you to life.
And under My blood, your sins turned to snow.
Under My heart you are both broken and whole.
I gave you to Me under the Tree.
My Cross is your Tree of Life! My Cross is your Tree of Life!

Awakened,... to Seek! (*Song Sol. 3:1-4a*)
(Words by Eugene Maddox and Rhonda McGinnis
Music and Vocals by Rhonda McGinnis)

I am without You, Whom my soul loves.
And I have sought You, Whom my soul loves.
You said if would seek you, my God that I would find You
I lay my heart before You, Whom my soul loves.

I'll wait no longer, for my soul's Love.
I will arise now, to Him I will run.
You said if would seek you, my God that I would find You
I lay my heart before You, Whom my soul loves.

My King! My Bridegroom! Whom my soul loves.
My eyes behold You, beloved Son!
My arms enfold You, to claim and hold You;
My heart enthrones You, the King of my loves,
It is You, Who my soul loves.
Who my soul loves.

(Repeat final verse)

The Breath Prayer Song (1 Pet. 1:3; John 1:34; Luke 18:38;)
(Words and music by Eugene Maddox
Vocals by Bethany Maddox)

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God.
Have mercy on me Lord, Have mercy on me.
For I am a sinner, Beloved by Thee!
{Repeat above once}
Have mercy on me. Have mercy on me.

Be pleased O God, to deliver me.
Be pleased O God, to deliver me.
Be pleased O God, to deliver me;
O Lord, make haste to help me.

One Name, One Heart (Ps. 86:11-12)
(Words by Eugene Maddox and Rhonda McGinnis
Music and vocals by Rhonda McGinnis)

Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your Truth;
Unite my heart! Unite my heart!
Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your Truth;
Unite my heart! Unite my heart! Unite my heart to fear Your Name.

And I will give thanks to You, O my Lord, My God,
With all my heart! With all my heart!
I will give thanks to You, O Lord, My God,
With all my heart! With all my heart!
Your Name I'll ever glorify!

And I will give praise to You, O my Lord, My God,
With all my heart! With all my heart!
I will give praise to You, O Lord, My God,
With all my heart! With all my heart!
Your Name I'll ever glorify!

The Sealing (*Song Sol. 8:6-7*)
 (Words and music by Eugene Maddox;
 Vocals by Bethany Music)

The bridegroom's request

Place Me like a seal over your heart;
 A seal for all to see—As though on your arm.
 My jealous love is stronger far than death;
 Its flashes are flashes of fire, the flame of the Lord.

Many waters cannot quench love, nor rivers overflow it.
 And if you try and buy it, You'll only be despised.
 My love is mine to give you; your love is what I'm seeking.
 So now until forever, place me o'er your heart.

My love I surely give you; your heart I'm always freeing
 To love me without ceasing. Just place me o'er your heart.
 My love I surely give you; Your heart I am completing.
 I'll keep it in my keeping; Just place me o'er your heart.

The bride's response

I'll place you like a seal over my heart!
 A seal for all to see as though on my arm.
 Your jealous love is stronger far than death;
 Its flashes are flashes of fire, the flame of the Lord.

Many waters cannot quench love, nor rivers overflow it.
 And if I try and buy it, I'll only be despised.
 Your love is yours to give me; my love is what you're seeking.
 So now until forever, I'll place you o'er my heart.

Your love you surely give me, my heart you're always freeing
 To love you without ceasing, so I'll place you o'er my heart.
 Your love you surely give me; my heart you are completing.
 You'll keep it in your keeping, so I place you o'er my heart!

Soul of Christ

(Words Adapted from “Anima Christi” in Prayertimes with Mother Theresa [Egan and Egan 145]

Music by Eugene Maddox)

Soul of Christ, sanctify me, Body of Christ, save me,
Blood of Christ, inebriate me,
Water from the side of Christ, Wash me;
Passion of Christ, Strengthen me. (

O, good Jesus hear me,
And hide me within Your wounds;
Hear me and hide me and hold me forever,
I'm Yours, I'm Yours!

Don't let me be separated from You,
From my enemy defend me,
In the hour of my death call me,
And bid me come unto You, and bid me come unto You.

That with Your saints I may praise You,
Forever and ever and ever;
That with Your saints I may praise You forever,
Amen! Amen!

O, good Jesus hear me,
And hide me within Your wounds,
Hear me and hide me and Hold me forever,
I'm Yours; I'm Yours,

That with Your saints I may praise You,
Forever and ever and ever;
That with Your saints I may praise You forever;
Amen! Amen! Amen!

APPENDIX E

Adapted from the Spiritual Formation Inventory

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<http://www.nlnc.org/stuff/formation.html>

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This self-inventory will help you assess your current level of spiritual formation. You will discover your areas of maturity and your areas where you have room to grow. Start right where you are, and let God lead you on this journey.

0 = Not here

1 = Thinking about living here

2 = Learning to live here

3 = Living here or beyond

1. My relationship to God

A) The Lordship of Christ

- ☐ Though I often catch myself living selfishly, I try to please God with my life.
- ☐ Though I catch myself prioritizing other things ahead of my relationship with God, I am committed to follow Jesus as Lord.
- ☐ I have given all of myself to Jesus as Lord, and he is free to live his life through me.
- ☐ While serving my Lord is very important, I am even more concerned to know and love him.
- ☐ When I think of myself, I see the bride of Christ.
- ☐ When Jesus thinks of me, he experiences joy.
- ☐ When I pray, I envision Jesus as my Bridegroom and King.

B) God's Word

- ☐ I read Scripture occasionally.
- ☐ I read Scripture regularly.
- ☐ The study of the book of the Bible, the Song of Solomon, is significant for my spiritual growth.
- ☐ When I read Scripture, a major goal for me is not "to read enough verses."
- ☐ When I read Scripture, I regularly seek God's presence.
- ☐ Prayer is a natural result of reading God's Word.
- ☐ I read in order to surrender.
- ☐ I study Scripture to find direction for my everyday life.
- ☐ I memorize, meditate, and feed on Scripture regularly.
- ☐ My mind and attitudes are controlled by applying scriptural truths to every area of my life.

C) Prayer

- ☐ I pray when facing problems.
- ☐ I pray daily.
- ☐ I pray specifically and trust God for answers.
- ☐ My prayers consist of adorations, confessions, thanksgivings, and supplications.
- ☐ I maintain a continuous attitude of prayer during the day.
- ☐ I pray specifically in the morning and evening.
- ☐ I regularly set aside a particular number of minutes each day for the purpose of praying.
- ☐ When praying, sometimes I use particular Scripture verses to help me.
- ☐ The major goal of my prayer life is to meet God and be transformed by Him.
- ☐ I know that I do not know how to pray so I rely upon the Holy Spirit in order to pray.
- ☐ I enjoy praying.
- ☐ I regularly (daily) listen to Christian music as a means of communing with God.
- ☐ I regularly pray (vocally) with other persons.

D) Faith

- ☐ I am assured of my salvation.
- ☐ If I were to die tonight, I absolutely know that I would go to heaven.
- ☐ My daily faith is based upon my trust in God's promises and not on my particular mood.
- ☐ I regularly experience God's love and forgiveness.
- ☐ I trust in God and his promises.
- ☐ I trust God's loving control in all the circumstances of my life.

2. My relationship to other believers

- ☐ I attend church regularly.
- ☐ I meet with a small group for Bible study and prayer.
- ☐ I share spiritual successes and failures with others, supporting them and accepting support from them.
- ☐ I actively minister to others.
- ☐ I disciple others who multiply themselves by discipling others.
- ☐ I have identified a mature Christian with whom I regularly meet, for the purpose of giving me spiritual direction.

3. My relationship to non-believers

- ☐ My coworkers, fellow students, and/or neighbors know that I am a Christian.
- ☐ When opportunities arise, I publicly identify with Christ.
- ☐ When opportunities arise, I share my testimony with others.
- ☐ I can present the Good News to someone so that they can choose to accept or reject it.
- ☐ I live a contagious Christian lifestyle.

4. Holiness

- ___ God is helping me eliminate sinful behaviors from my life (such as profane language, ignoring the Sabbath, sexual immorality including premarital or extramarital relations, habits known to be destructive to the body, quarrelling, retaliation, gossip, dishonesty, indulging in acts of pride, participating in entertainments that dishonor God, etc.).
- ___ God is helping me eliminate impure thoughts from my life (such as hatred, jealousy, envy, lust, resentment, etc.).
- ___ God is the full architect of my personhood.
- ___ I am aware of at least one place in my life where another person shamed me.
- ___ I can point to places where God's love is beginning to heal wounded places in my heart.
- ___ I am aware of instances where I shamed another person.
- ___ I regularly ask other persons to forgive me when I wrong them.
- ___ In the last six months, I have read at least one book for the purpose of giving more of my life to God.
- ___ As I read Christian books, I intentionally include some of the highly respected Christian authors of the first nineteen centuries.
- ___ I am presently engaged in a specific plan for my own spiritual formation.
- ___ In the last six months, I can point to a specific, broken place in my life where God's love has begun to heal me.
- ___ My life is characterized by loving God with all my heart, and loving others as myself.
(Matthew 22:36-38)

APPENDIX F**Our Group Covenant**

In order that we may become more intimate with our Lord Jesus, I commit to:

1. Seeking the Lord with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.
2. Opening my heart to spiritual concepts and methods, which, though they have been used since the beginning of the Christian Church, may be new to me.
3. Praying daily for each of the other group members.
4. Speaking the truth in love in each of the group sessions, assignments, interviews, and spiritual inventories.
5. Attending every one of the group sessions if at all possible.
6. Being at our meeting place at least five minutes before each session.
7. Setting aside thirty to forty quality minutes each day in order to complete the daily assignment.
8. Engaging all my abilities to keep this covenant.

Signatures of group members:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____

APPENDIX G

Interview Protocol

1. The Pre-Project Interview

- a. "On average, about how many minutes per week do you spend alone in prayer?
In reading the Bible? In reading Christian books?
 - i. Are there any particular methods you are using in your reading or praying?
 - ii. What one thing do you most hope to accomplish by praying?
To what extent do you feel you are accomplishing it?
 - iii. What one thing do you most hope to accomplish by reading the Bible? To what extent do you feel you are accomplishing it?
 - iv. Have you read any Christian books lately? What were they?
 - v. Does Christian music play a part in your daily life? Explain.
- b. "When you think of Jesus, what concepts or titles (such as "Lord") come to your mind?"
 - i. Have you ever thought of him as your bridegroom?
 - ii. Were you to think of him as your bridegroom, how might that alter your concept of him and how he relates to you?
- c. "To what deeper place do you sense God may be calling you?"

2. The Post-Project Interview

- a. "Has your relationship with Christ changed as a result of our ten weeks together? If so, how?
 - i. What differences do you see in your own heart?
 - ii. How has your devotional life changed?
- b. "How has relating to Jesus as your Bridegroom-King and yourself as his bride made a difference in your life?
 - i. In your devotional life?
 - ii. In the way you view yourself?
 - iii. In the way you relate to shame, both past and present?
- c. Please rate the elements of our weekly gathering (1 = not helpful; 5 = very helpful)
 - i. Discussing last weeks (at home) *Lectio* or Divine Office
 - ii. Small groups (masters and prayer)
 - iii. Singing the songs of the bride
 - iv. Refreshments
 - v. Leader's teaching time/Bible study
 - vi. Bishop Carey's prayer
 - vii. Divine office (together)
- d. Question four: During which of the above (in letter "c") did the greatest life-change take place for you?

- e. Please rate the following elements of this study as to how helpful (or unhelpful) they were. (1 = not helpful; 5 = extremely helpful)
- i. *Lectio Divina*
 - ii. Scenic overlook reading
 - ii. Breath prayer
 - iii. Divine Office
 - iv. The Song of Solomon
 - v. Readings from the masters
 - vi. The Christian music CD
(Was there a most meaningful song?)
 - vii. The Bridegroom's healing of his bride from shame
- f. Which, if any, of the above do you plan to use on a daily basis?
- g. Which, if any, of the above do you (in the future) plan on using on close to a daily basis?
- h. How can these ten weeks be made better for the next group?
- i. What was the most helpful aspect of the entire experience for you?
- j. After two weeks, how is your Spiritual Formation plan going?

APPENDIX H

Field Notes

1. 2 September

- a. The small group time that involved reading a 24-line story of John Bunyan's conversion seemed to go poorly. Participants were asked within their small group first to read the story and then answer 2 questions. When the groups returned and I asked them of their experience, there was little response. Clearly, most hearts had not been touched. Why? I can only conjecture at this point, but I believe it is because the group members were reading to gain information but not transformation. They read as they have been taught in school: "Read quickly and quantitatively, comprehending as much as you can." Solution:
 - 1) I will ask them first to spend 5 full minutes reading the weekly stories before any of them comment.
 - 2) I will teach them what I call the "scenic overlook" concept of reading.
 - a. When driving on the Blue Ridge Parkway, is your primary goal to get from point "A" to point "B"?
 - b. Of course not! Rather, you are driving slowly and expectantly. You KNOW that soon there will be a beautiful overlook. Moreover, you are LOOKING for it.
 - c. When you see one that sparks your interest, you
 - i. Slow down
 - ii. Pull off
 - iii. Park your car
 - iv. Shut your car off
 - v. Get out
 - vi. Take a deep breath
 - vii. Forget about everything else
 - viii. Stand and stare
 - ix. Walk up and down
 - x. Take it in
 - xi. Time ceases to exist
 - xii. For a little while, you live there
 - xiii. Reflect/Consider/Speak
 - 3) A goal in spiritual reading is to so read as to
 - a. Know that an overlook will soon exist.
 - b. Read (slowly and expectantly) in such a way as you are primarily looking for that overlook.
 - c. Allow the Holy Spirit to reveal His particular overlook to you.
 - d. Upon seeing it, stop! You have found your treasure.

- 4) Groups will close with group prayer, with members instructed to share their need that arose from reading the passage. They will then pray for one another's needs.
- b. Best part of the evening came after the small group time when we began learning about the Song of Solomon. While there was not a lot of discussion, everyone seemed to be listening most attentively. At the end of the evening, most of the group requested copies of the transparencies.

2. 9 September

- a. I began the evening, asking for input regarding their assignment to read from the Song of Songs 15 minutes per day.
 - i. All but two were able to make the transition from the bridegroom-king, Solomon, to the Bridegroom-King, Jesus.
 - ii. A few shared insights they had gained that demonstrated an experiential knowledge of Jesus as their bridegroom.
- b. I then spent time explaining the "scenic overlook" concept of reading. It was received well, and all three of the small groups benefited. Whereas last week 2 of the 3 groups were done before the allotted 15 minutes, this week all three groups were still going strong at the 15 minute mark and probably could have continued another 15 minutes!
- c. Discussing the *Lectio Divina* went very well. All were interacting and listening well. While I was able to explain the *Lectio* quite thoroughly, I did run out of time and we were unable to go through it together. However, I'm not sure that this is bad, as going over it again may well have been overkill. As I shared my version of the *Lectio*, I felt absolutely exhilarated! I have been pregnant with this for years!
- d. A cursory glance at the group's response to the first journaling question shows a living, dynamic relationship to Christ in the hearts of many of the group.

3. 16 September

- a. Once again, the small groups did well. They were able to dig deep. The "scenic overlook" concept is successful.
- b. I briefly reviewed the steps of the *Lectio*, using about ten minutes. This was very appreciated, as there was a little confusion. The group asked a number of excellent questions.

- c. Tonight was our first night of singing. It was clear that they had been listening to their CDs. It went as well as a first night of singing could!
- d. That part of the evening through which the Lord seems to touch the deepest parts of our hearts appears to be the time in which I teach. Tonight, we looked at Song of Solomon 1:5-6. When the group began to see the bride as having been shamed, many began to identify with her. She became as one of them. At this moment, one person who had so far received no benefit from the Song remarked that seeing the bride as shamed, at last made the bride come alive.
- e. The final two illustrations were truly powerful. Both my own personal sharing of my mother's death and the story of the drop of blood appeared to impact the group strongly. This was the high water mark of these first three sessions.

4. 23 September

- a. As we were about to go into our singing room, one person remarked to me that this was her favorite part of the evening! Hearing this both stunned and blessed me. Tonight the singing went still better than the previous week. The people sang the songs heartily. Part of the reason for this must be that they are able to identify these songs with the *Lectio* and the bride.
- b. As I began the teaching time, it was clear that I had the group's attention. The group had already understood that the bride had a beautiful self-image. They were clearly excited enough to travel through the numerous passages that told of the many ways the bridegroom-king brought her healing. One person spoke of the shame she had experienced through and after her divorce.
- c. Reflecting upon last evening, I am realizing that there are those whose eyes are engaged but their mouths are not. I must be more aware of them and try to draw them out. This is difficult for me to do with twelve in the group. A smaller size would, I think, be even more beneficial.
- d. Finishing with Communion under a real banner of love was outstanding. We went forward in groups of three, with each taking turns in both serving and receiving the elements. As the two servers distributed the elements, they did so speaking a blessing over the one receiving. The group of three moved around, enabling the one receiving to literally stand under the banner of love.

5. 30 September

- a. Small groups and singing went well. Nothing unusual.

- b. As I put these ten weeks together, I wondered to what extent this concept of the breath prayer would be helpful. Tonight, I was gloriously surprised. As we discussed it in the Bible study segment, many seemed instantly to understand and affirm it. There were a few very good questions. As best as I could tell, no one felt left out or disconnected tonight.

6. 7 October

- a. As I listened to one of the small group's conversations, it was clear that the comments on perfection were most helpful. By this time in the process, there have been those with high ambitions and plans who have in some ways fallen short. How freeing it was for that group to hear that Therese had these same struggles and yet found peace in the fact that she was continuing to struggle.
- b. During the time that the members are in their small groups, I skim over their homework. When I saw their reactions to their breath prayers, I was elated. Virtually every person had understood it and was enjoying using it.
- c. During the Bible study segment, we talked about the Divine Office. The group understood the concept well. We took time to go over in detail both the morning and end of day liturgies. The very best part of the evening came, however, when we used the evening liturgy for worship. If the members can have as positive an experience with the Divine Office at home as they have experienced tonight, then I feel it will surely be a success.

7. 14 October

- a. I began the evening by asking the group about their experience with the Divine Office. The responses caught me off guard. One person had tried it for two days and declared it null and void! He then begged to go back to his *Lectio*, which he had come to love. Others were trying to make the Divine Office work by finding ways to adapt it. Still others absolutely loved it! This was sad, comical, encouraging, and slightly chaotic!

I responded by explaining that this was a very different "bike" than the *Lectio*, and that learning how to ride it might be challenging and even difficult. I also reminded them that these ten weeks were very much like going to a cafeteria where a person chooses a few things but leaves other things behind. We talked about their final home assignment where they would pick and choose the ingredients for their spiritual formation plan. I told them that the Divine Office might not be for all of them but to keep trying to learn to ride this new bike anyway! With regard to the one person

who absolutely did not want to do the Divine Office but was dying to do the *Lectio*, I gave him permission to drop the Divine Office and switch back to the *Lectio*, as he had clearly made his cafeteria choice. To the rest, I recommended continuing with the Divine Office.

- b. For the first time this evening, the music felt like it was getting old. Perhaps its because the air conditioner wasn't turned on properly and it was warm.
- c. The Bible study went well. The Divine Office at the end was very good. I'm seriously wondering, "Perhaps I should have continued with the *Lectio* (as homework) for the entire ten weeks, and closed each of the ten sessions with the Divine Office, alternating between the two evening liturgies."

8. 21 October

- a. This week I made a slight change in the curriculum. Instead of requiring the class to continue with the Divine Office (minus one who is already doing the *Lectio* at this time), I decided to give the members a choice for this week's homework. "Would they rather do the Divine Office or the *Lectio* this week?" The results were as follows. Four chose to do the *Lectio*, three chose the Divine Office, and five chose to combine them!
- b. This week I added some new popular contemporary music to the mix. Very helpful! I should have been doing this all along. I will so continue.
- c. Our Bible study time was almost electrifying. There were a few who had significantly experienced those moments when the Bridegroom comes to us—at an inopportune time—seeking and pursuing us. Many others seemed very interested. I will be interested to see the results of their homework, which dealt with this issue.
- d. As we quickly near an end to our ten weeks, I am finding myself more and more concerned that without some kind of regular, ongoing accountability, the gains made these ten weeks will eventually decline. What kind of tool could I have built in to these weeks that would have encouraged and enabled them to be, in some way, accountable to each other after the ten weeks? This is, I believe, a very significant question.

9. 28 October

- a. The beginning responses regarding their face-to-face time at home (*Lectio* and/or Divine Office) were excellent. While some are still shy to share, when they do share it is absolutely excellent. Many if not all are truly experiencing God in their homes through their devotional lives!

- b. Tonight, the atmosphere (after small groups) was quite different. The best description I can give would be to say that it was giddy and very laid back. Was this because the ten weeks were coming to an end? Had the group lost its focus, or were they simply feeling at home and having fun?
- c. When I passed out the spiritual formation worksheets, there seemed to be some confusion. Nevertheless, in the end the group seemed to understand them.
- d. One person made the remark, "This can't end." I believe much of the group feels the same way. Nevertheless, we are all so busy, what can we do? I am more and more feeling the need for this precious group to continue in some way. Here is my idea. I, after talking with a couple of group members, will suggest that we meet in December, after Christmas. We would meet for dinner at Laverne Larsen's home. Here, we would do the following things.
 - ❖ Supper and fellowship
 - ❖ Small group experience with a devotional reading and prayer (as we have been doing), and an opportunity for accountability wherein we will report to our small group our progress regarding our Spiritual Formation Plan. There will also be an opportunity to update and amend it. New spiritual formation worksheets will be available.

We can decide then if we want to continue to meet so.

10. 4 November

- a. I'm not sure I have ever seen a greater night. As the members shared their Spiritual Formation Plans, it was clear eleven out of twelve members had chosen to incorporate significant elements of the project into their plans. Each of the twelve members created excellent plans.
- b. A few shared as to how their lives had been genuinely changed, noting that God was taking them to deeper spiritual places than they'd ever known.
- c. The time at which members (one on each side) stood up and prayed for the member who had just shared was incredible. The prayers were full of love. Clearly, this group had bonded at a very intimate level.
- d. When I suggested that we meet for dinner at Laverne Larsen's, the group responded positively. We'll meet in January and hopefully again.
- e. The evening went until 10:30 p.m.! Next time, I will have to eliminate some aspects of this final evening. But what an evening! To God be the glory!
- f. I now believe this class could be taught to as many as thirty, though not ideally. We'd simply have more small groups! The opening sharing, singing,

refreshment, and Bible study times should accept larger numbers well.

APPENDIX I**Prayer of Bishop Walter Carey**

O Holy Spirit of God,
come again to my heart and fill me.
I open the windows of my soul to let Thee in;
come and possess me; fill me with light and truth.

Of myself I am an unprofitable servant, an empty vessel:

Fill me that I may live the life of Thy Spirit,
the life of truth and goodness,
the life of wisdom and strength,
the life of beauty and love.

And guide me today in all things:
guide me to the people I should meet and help,
to the circumstances in which I may best serve God,
whether by my actions or by my suffering.

But above all make Christ to be formed in me,
that I may dethrone self in my heart
and make Him King.

Bind me to Christ by all Thy ways,
known and unknown,
by holy thoughts, and unseen graces, and sacramental ties,
that He may be in me,
and I in Him, this day and for ever.

Walter Julius Carey, Bishop of Bloemfontein (1921-1934)

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